

Baseball in Iowa • Town Teams • Cal McVey • Bud Fowler • James Wilkinson • Keokuk Teams

Spring 2006 • \$9

# Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED





# Front Porch

Dear Readers,

Sports history—like political and military history—has its heroic and mythic figures, its valiant but doomed efforts, its victories and losses. We present some of these in this baseball issue. But sports history, like political and military history—and social and family history—is also about the ordinary individual, the one who seeks out pleasure at the end of a long day's work, who diligently practices a set of skills, who enjoys camaraderie as much as competition, and who holds tight to hometown loyalty, pride, and memories. You'll see all of these threads in the stories inside. Chances are, they'll bring to mind some of your own experiences.

My baseball career was a short one. The closest I got to "organized" baseball—softball, really—was playing on the Blue Grass Sunshine Workers 4-H team. I have no memory of what position I played, or how good we were. What I do remember is how the game played on my senses. I can still see the dust kicked up when a wayward throw from outfield bounced into the infield, how a fly ball looked against the dark sky, the drama of playing under the lights on a hot summer night. I remember the rich smell of my brother's baseball glove, which he loaned me that summer. Since he was 23 and I was 11, the glove swallowed my hand. But I admired the deep pocket he'd pounded into it, and every now and then a fly ball fell smack into that pocket. What a surprise.

Another sense memory is the sound of our team "chattering" when the opposing team's batter stood at the plate. As our pitcher wound up, we began the chatter like a swarm of cicadas: "Ay, batter, batter, batter, batter, SWING!" Surely our hypnotic chatter unnerved and intimidated the batter as much as any well-placed pitch.

Although we had occasional evening practices in town, getting farm kids together in the summertime wasn't easily accomplished. So I practiced batting on my own. Establishing homeplate at one end of our expansive lawn, I would plant my feet the appropriate distance apart, take a breath, and hold the bat in my right hand and the ball loosely in my left. With brilliant coordination (or so I thought), I'd toss the ball up, add my left hand to the bat, eye the ball, and swing confidently just as it came down.

I got pretty good at it, nearly always hitting it past the clothesline pole. If I hit the ball to the far end of the lawn, it invariably rolled under the rhubarb and lay hidden under the giant leaves. If I hit it just over the fence, chances are it fell amidst the thicket of wild

roses. Even with the help of the bat to extend my reach, I'd emerge with scratches on my arms and legs.

One astonishing time I hit it past the rhubarb, beyond the wild roses, and over the corncrib. Nobody watched the ball sail over the roof, and nobody witnessed me fetching it out of the hog pen behind the corncrib. Family members tend to discount this feat, but I swear to it. It was my one moment of sports glory. I'll never forget it.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor

## Letter from a Reader

When I received my Winter 2005 issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, I went through it carefully as I have the previous issues. The issue I must admit piqued my interest more than previous issues especially because of the many pictures and articles on Christmas. What surprised me was that there was no mention of Paul Engle's story "An Iowa Christmas," which I feel is one of the best descriptions of early Iowa Christmases one can find. His vivid descriptions of the handmade ornaments and more in his vivid picturing of the kitchen and all the many types of foods being prepared can only make the reader want to be at that Christmas table. Anyway I thought it odd he had been omitted from your well-done collection of Christmas articles and pictures.

I also read with great interest the article "Pardon Me, Governor: Ernest Rathbun, William Harding, and the Politics of Justice." Please try and place more of this type of history in forthcoming issues.

Finally, I am wondering if you intend on publishing articles on southeastern Iowa, where I live and was born and raised. I always enjoy receiving the magazine and appreciate all the hard work you and your staff put into making it a quality publication.

—Tim S. Dupy  
Burlington, Iowa

**Editor's reply:** Although Engle's Christmas descriptions are some of the best ever, one of our goals here is to present lesser-known material that is seldom found in public libraries or bookstores. Another of our goals is to publish historical articles about all parts of Iowa or about experiences that ring true anywhere in the state. But I agree that there's nothing like reading about one's own part of the state. We'll keep an eye out for material on your part of Iowa. Thanks, Tim, for writing.

## Iowa Heritage Illustrated

### Editor

Ginalie Swaim  
ginalie-swaim@uiowa.edu  
319-335-3932  
State Historical Society of Iowa  
402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City  
Iowa 52240-1806

[www.iowahistory.org](http://www.iowahistory.org)

### Letters to the Editor

Share your thoughts with the editor and readers here on the Front Porch. Send letters or e-mail to address above. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

### Memberships

Inger.Hall@iowa.gov  
(515-281-8741) or  
Molly.Culbertson@iowa.gov  
(515-281-8823)  
State Historical Society of Iowa,  
600 East Locust, Des Moines,  
Iowa 50319. This magazine is a  
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### Back & Single Issues

Contact Deb Pedersen  
319-335-3916  
deb-pedersen@uiowa.edu  
State Historical Society of Iowa  
402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City  
Iowa 52240-1806

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# Iowa Heritage

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Collector's Issue! Baseball in Iowa

- 2 **Iowa's Passion for the Game**  
*by the Editor*
- 3 **Baseball Mania Strikes Iowa**  
*by John Liepa*
- 8 **Iowa Women in Baseball**  
*by Ginalie Swaim*
- 11 **Hometowns of Iowa's Major Leaguers**  
*by John Liepa*
- 12 **The Cincinnati Red Stockings and Cal McVey,  
Iowa's First Professional Baseball Player**  
*by John Liepa*
- 18 **Baseball Card Images of Iowa's Hall of Famers**  
*by John Liepa*
- 19 **Warming Up Feller**  
*by Don Fish*
- 20 **Not Yet Ready for the Big Leagues: The 1875 Keokuk Westerns,  
Iowa's First Professional Baseball Team**  
*by John Liepa*
- 23 **The Waterloo Mullens and the White Sox**  
*by Peg Mullen*
- 26 **Boosting the Home Team**  
*by Ginalie Swaim*
- 28 **Bud Fowler: The First African American Professional Baseball Player and  
the 1885 Keokuks**  
*by Ralph J. Christian*
- 32 **African Americans in Iowa Baseball**
- 33 **Hocksy and Hoop**  
*by Douglas Bauer*
- 34 **Kids Rule the Diamond**
- 36 **Sports Sites: The Old Ball Park**
- 38 **Wilkie: James Leslie Wilkinson and the Iowa Years**  
*by Ralph J. Christian*
- 43 **Town Teams**



Adolf Schmieder strikes a pose (Amana, 1930).

SHSI (IOWA CITY); PETER STUCK COLLECTION

## On the Cover

Above, from left: "Members of the National and American League baseball teams at Pella" (circa 1955); baseball great Calvin McVey (from Seymour H. Church, *Base Ball*, vol. 1, 1902); part of the Albia-Hiteman kittenball team (1930s). Bottom photo identified as "Shad-duchs Park . . . Lyons."

(LYONS AND MCVEY IMAGES COURTESY RALPH J. CHRISTIAN;  
PELLA AND ALBIA-HITEMAN: SHSI.)



## Iowa's passion for the game

IN 1888, MARK TWAIN DESCRIBED THE SPORT OF BASEBALL as “the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century.”

Baseball as an expression of that century lost no vigor in the 20th century. Nor did baseball lose its capacity to link the local to the national. A town history for Eagle Grove, Iowa, tells how “the World Series Baseball Playoffs were so important in the early 1920’s [that] the baseball plays were relayed to the Northwestern Railroad trainmaster’s office by telegraph. A man would bring the message down Broadway to Gildner McCarty’s men’s store where, in the window, a board representing a baseball diamond had been set up. Electric light bulbs showed the strikes, balls and the bases the players were on. Bleachers were set up in the street to accommodate the men. However, boys from both Sacred Heart and Public High School either delayed returning to school or skipped entirely. This was better than waiting for the newspaper report.”

Iowa’s passion for baseball was not just at the national level. Town and cities of all sizes fielded teams. Often they struggled with the finances, just as the national teams did, for baseball is a story of business as well as sport.

This issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* takes a look at baseball in a special way. Detailed historical accounts abound of Iowa’s best-known players—Cap Anson, Billy Sunday, Bill Zuber, and Bob Feller. What we offer in this issue are seldom-heard stories about significant Iowa firsts and Iowa figures in U.S. baseball history. And for the national pastime at the community level, watch for our “passion for the game” vignettes and images scattered throughout the issue.

—The Editor

SHSI (DES MOINES)



Frank Beymer winds up for a pitch in this studio portrait created in 1890.

COURTESY JOHN LIEPA



A Sioux City ball player keeps his eye on the ball (probably suspended from a string) in this 1880s cabinet card produced by Old Judge Cigarettes.



# Baseball Mania Strikes Iowa

by John Liepa

By spring's arrival in Iowa in 1867, a new phenomenon had taken hold. More than 200 teams had been organized to play baseball in the state. Iowa's largest cities and smallest towns—it made no difference—were all enthused about America's fastest growing sport. Communities as tiny as Bangor—with fewer than a hundred houses and only 600 residents—had their teams. Towns not much larger, such as Knoxville with 1,100 citizens, probably had more than one. Distinctive or colorful names were chosen to give each club its own identity: the Proud Mahaskas in Oskaloosa, the Hesperians in Monticello, and in Indianola, the Gorilla Club. Grundy Center had the Wadiloups and Fort Dodge, the Wahkonsas.

The *Keokuk Daily Gate City*, in August 1867, dramatized the baseball "contagion" as only a 19th-century newspaper could: "Men and women and little ones are becoming spellbound. . . . It is fastening itself upon almost every community in the land. . . . High and low, rich and poor—the kid gloved exquisite and the honest laborer, all bow before its onward march. . . . Such is the influence of the Base Ball mania of these times."

For a game that has long been a part of American culture, a myth about its origins still persists. The myth, simply put, is that Abner Doubleday invented the game in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839. Because of that myth, the Baseball Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown, and every year, as new members are inducted, major leaguers play a baseball game on Doubleday Field in Cooperstown. Abner Doubleday was a cadet at West Point Military Academy in 1839 and may have had some rudimentary knowledge of baseball. But baseball was not invented. Rather it evolved out of numerous bat-and-ball games (rounders, town ball, tip-cat, and others) brought to colonial America from England and other parts of Europe. Early on, the game was played under various sets of rules; there were the Massachusetts rules, the Philadelphia rules, the New York City rules, and so on. They varied on basic aspects, such as the shape of the field, the number of players, and the length of the game. In New England, a base runner would be out if he was hit by a thrown ball.

The individual most responsible for formalizing

baseball into what approximates today's game was Alexander Cartwright of the Knickerbocker baseball club in New York City. In September 1845 he helped draft the first written rules. Many are still used today: a diamond-shaped infield with three bases and home plate; foul lines; and nine-man teams, with each player covering a specific position. Batting was rotated, and three outs retired a side.

Where commerce led, culture and sports followed. By the 1850s baseball had reached the busy river town of Davenport, Iowa. The *Daily Gazette* of May 29, 1858, stated that "two 'Town Ball' clubs have been formed from the original one, and they are now proceeding to a regular organization. They will have a big list of members, a lot of their own for playing purposes, and a good time generally. They have their rules and regulations printed, and everything will be done on system."

In these early years, baseball clubs and teams were strictly amateur, playing largely for social enjoyment. Ball players left their workplaces at day's end (or earlier) to meet at the local diamond and play an invigorating game. Unlike card playing and horse racing, baseball was considered clean and honest, an innocent and respectable sport that even women could watch without offense. As the Mt. Pleasant newspaper noted, the local Hawk-Eye baseball club members were "the very best young men of our city" and "profane language is strictly prohibited, and is never heard during their games."

Individual teams often represented a particular social class or occupation: tradesmen, or store clerks, or college students, for example. The officers of Davenport's "Pastime base-ball club No. 2" comprised two leading citizens—George L. Davenport, the president of a gas company and the son of a town founder; and Joseph A. LeClaire, businessman and nephew of another town founder—as well as a lawyer, editor, jeweler, merchant, tailor, and "House, Sign and Steamboat painter." In mid-June, the Davenport's *Daily Gazette* reported that "the Cricket and Base Ball clubs take exercise now with a good deal of regularity. The players are improving, and will soon be ready to challenge somebody."

Those who did not exercise "with a good deal of regularity" were later reminded by the city's *Morning*



News that "we Americans are a scraggy, consumptive, liver complaining set—a drug devouring, whiskey-drinking people, who believe in long doctor's bills, and in 'living like lightning and dying like lightning.' . . . All our energies seem devoted to the lessening of physical labor; and American ingenuity and American industry seem destined to effect the most wonderful revolution the world has ever yet beheld, and that is, the almost total abolition of manual work. We forget that we have bodies to be cared for, muscles to be developed, and lungs to be preserved and exercised. . . . Americans . . . never learn

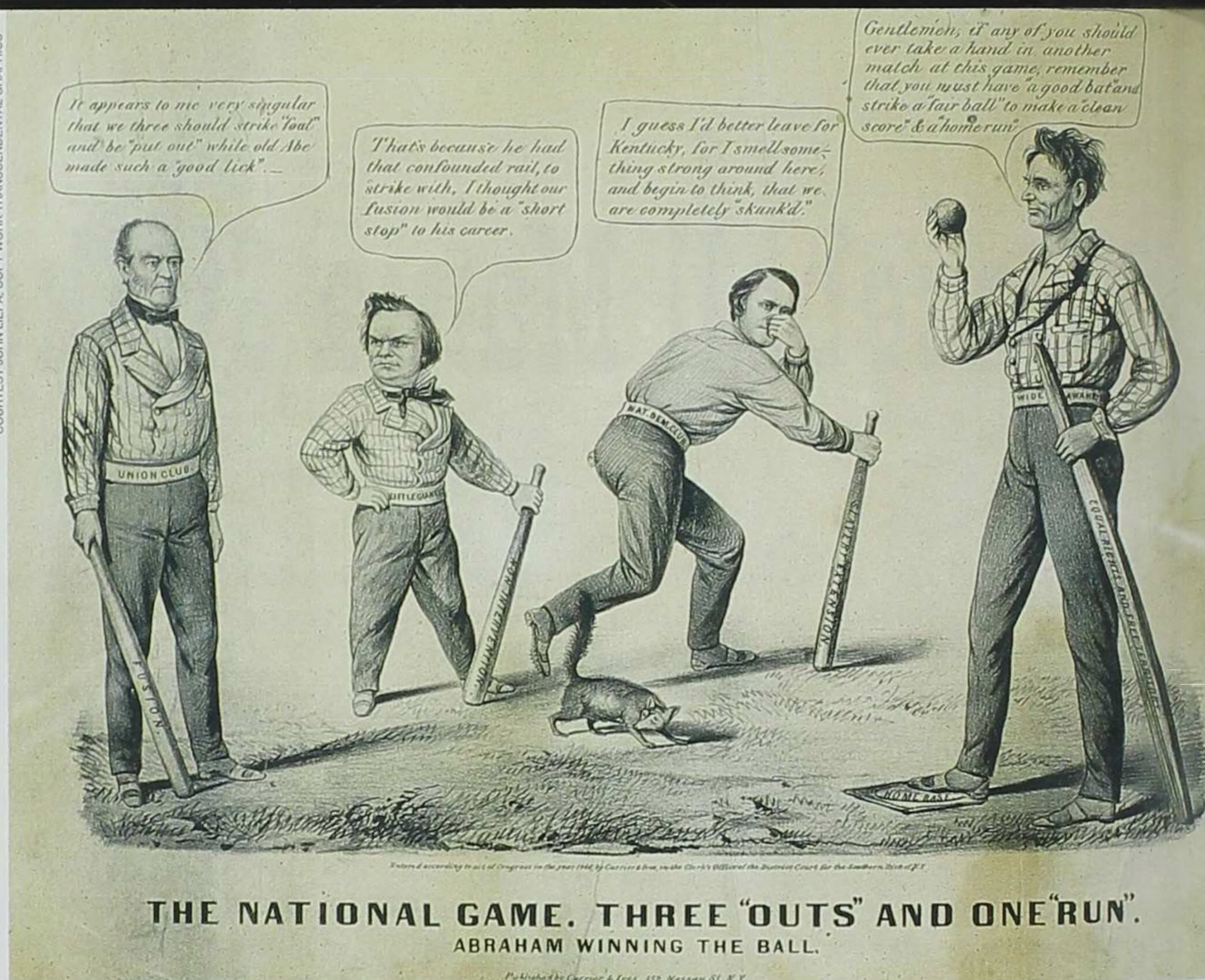
to take exercise—notwithstanding the many examples set them by their foreign brethren—and base ball clubs, and cricket clubs, and boat clubs, dwindle away after the first or second meeting. . . . There must be soundness of body, ere there will be soundness of heart and mind. The 'moral muscle' can only be developed by the assiduous care of the physical."

"What has become of the old Cricket Club?" the same *Gazette* wondered the next April, while noting that "an impromptu gathering of base ball players took place on the bluff . . . and a few games played with hearty zeal. A meeting of the members of the old Base Ball Club is desired this evening at Jewel's paint shop on Third Street."

Not everyone was zealous about the game. In March 1859, the *Washington (Iowa) Press* reprimanded: "Boys! Boys!! Playing ball is nice sport—it is helpful and invigorating—and we like to see you enjoying yourselves in that way. But there is a place as well as a time for everything.—Now the County Judge and other citizens have gone to a good deal of trouble and expense to plant trees in the court yard and sow it in grass seed, so that it may look pleasant and nice and be an ornament to the town. But don't you see the trees will all be killed, and the grass can't grow at all, if it is made a playground for all the boys in town? Certainly you do, though perhaps you didn't think of it before, and now we are sure you will find some other place to play ball—out in the street or on the common somewhere. Of course you will."

A lady in Keokuk shared her frustration with Gate

COURTESY, JOHN LIEPA, COPY WORK, TRANSCENDENTAL GRAPHICS



Already in 1860, when this political cartoon appeared, baseball was called the "National Game."

City readers in March 1859: "Almost every evening a large number of boys engage in 'ball playing' near our house. I can endure the screaming and yelling . . . but the players become thirsty, and we have been sodding and planting our trees. A portion of the boys jump the fence, and of course, that ruins the grass and damages the trees. The others come in at the gate, and when they go out, leave it open, thereby giving a general invitation to all the cows around to 'walk in.'"

"Think of a pump being rattled every minute, and water wasted; for every boy pumps a bucketful when he fills the dipper. I cannot endure this annoyance any longer. Boys, I dislike to refuse you a 'cup of cold water,' but I find it very annoying to have about fifty tumbling in and out of the yard every afternoon. You will please change the usual programme, and oblige."

Baseball's increasing popularity in the 1850s was interrupted by the Civil War. Very few accounts have been found of any baseball activity in Iowa during the war. One appeared in the *Dubuque Daily Times* in August 1863, reminding the Dubuque City Base Ball Club to meet behind "Judge Wilson's residence, promptly at half past three, this afternoon." Four days later, another item announced "a match game between the nines selected from the Hawkeye Base Ball Club" at the old race track.

Civil War camps, even prison camps, were where



the most baseball was played during the war. Soldiers whiled away tedious hours practicing the game. When they returned to their hometowns, they brought the game with them. War had taught them camaraderie, discipline, order, and management—traits essential to putting together a successful baseball organization.

The 1860s game shared similarities with fast-pitch softball today: the pitcher tossed the ball with an underhand motion. Although the game resembled modern-day baseball in some aspects, there were substantial differences. The batter could call for a high ball or a low one. The pitcher's job was not to strike out the batter, but to get the batter out on the bases and to deal with him there before he could score.

Gloves and catcher's masks were not used until 1870 and were considered "unmanly." Broken fingers were both an inevitable consequence and a badge of honor. Every old-time catcher was proud of his hands, often thickened and crippled in every joint. Iowa's first professional player, Calvin McVey, played several positions including catcher from 1869 to 1885. Years later a baseball historian described his hands as "big ham fists with discolored lumps and knobs, odd-angled joints, and mangled fingers." As early as 1867 a dialogue titled "A Scarred Hero" in a Des Moines newspaper joked about the "mania" for playing baseball despite its risks:

What is the matter with your finger?  
Struck with a ball and drove up; but it's a noble game.  
Precisely; and your thumb is useless, is it not?  
Yes; struck with a ball and broken.  
That finger joint?  
A ball struck it. No better game to improve a man's physical condition—strengthens his sinews.  
You walk lame. That foot, isn't it?  
No; it's the—the—the—well, a bat flew out of a player's hand and hit my knee pan. He had the innings.  
One of your front teeth is gone?  
Knocked out by a ball—only an accident.  
Your right hand and your nose have been peeled—how's that?  
Slipped down at a second base—only a mere scratch.  
And you like this sort of fun?  
Like it? Glory in it! Perfectly splendid!—Healthiest game in the world, sir! Take a hand?

In early town-building, a church and a schoolhouse had been essential; so too was baseball to a community in the second half of the century. Matches represented much more than winning or losing. They were about showing off one's community and players and exhibiting civic pride. A successful ball club put a town on the map.

Two of Iowa's best teams were Fort Dodge's Wahkonsa Base Ball Club and Marshalltown's Marshall Base Ball Club. In early August 1866, Louis D. Button, the president of the Fort Dodge club (and school principal), put forth a challenge: "In order to create an interest in the great American Game of Base Ball in Northwestern Iowa, and for the mutual benefit of all concerned, the 'first nine' of the Wahkonsa B. B. Club hereby challenge the 'first nine' of the Marshalltown Club, to play a single game. . . . The game to be played in accordance with the regulations prescribed by the Base Ball

Convention held in New York City December 13th, 1865." The challenge was accepted, and the game was heralded as "a grand match." The date and place were set: September 12 at Boone, 30 miles southeast of Fort Dodge and 50 miles west of Marshalltown. Fort Dodge's *Iowa North West* sent a reporter to cover the game. His

COURTESY JOHN LIEPA



Perhaps Iowa's earliest "baseball card" is this 1866 cabinet card of Washington's baseball club and its "first nine" best players. Below: Unidentified team from a carte de visite photo.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)







COURTESY JOHN LIEPA. COPY WORK TRANSCENDENTAL GRAPHICS

The Marshalltown club in 1867 poses, a year after the team's "grand match" with the Fort Dodge Wahkonsa club.

story did not appear for two weeks (the editor explained that "Our Special Reporter was a little behind time"), but what he lacked in timeliness he made up in color. His coverage was as much about camaraderie, civic pride, and celebration as about the actual game: "The first nine of the Wahkonsa Club, their scorer and your special reporter, left Fort Dodge on Tuesday morning, the 11th, in one of the North Western Stage Company's splendid new coaches, drawn by one of the finest four-horse teams in the State, under the management of the accomplished horseman, 'Steve.' As the day was wet and disagreeable . . . the boys managed to drive dull care away with songs, stories, anecdotes, sells [hoaxes], and yarns, reminding us more of a gay wedding excursion, than a matched nine who were to contend for the championship of North Western Iowa . . . and as I looked upon these athletic nine, taken from our best business men, I felt like challenging the State to produce a better selection, both as to moral worth, business qualifications, and muscular development.

" . . . [We arrived] in Boonsboro about dark; singing as we passed through to Boone, every thing known to vocalists, from 'Old Hundred' to 'Babble, babble little brook.' The inhabitants stared at us; children looked amazed; dogs barked. . . .

" . . . We learned that the Marshall Club had not as yet put in an appearance, as promised. . . . After stow-

ing away our clubs, and plowing and irrigating our faces, we partook of a sumptuous supper prepared for us, and found the landlord had discommoded himself and guests to make us comfortable during our stay. We were met and welcomed by the citizens of Boone. . . . The night was put in with song and merriment. . . .

"Wednesday morning opened up a beautiful day, and we arose from our easy couches, rested, buoyant, and confident. . . . The grounds were then selected, and our boys performed the hard work of laying them out and preparing them, and arranging every thing in order, with bases, posts, &c."

Eight of the nine from Fort Dodge were bachelors, and, according to the reporter, their hearts went "pit-a-pat" at the sight of the "beautiful hundred ladies" who now arrived on the excursion train with the Marshalltown team, the brass band, and other spirited fans.

"The game was the most exciting scene I ever witnessed. Bets were freely made . . . and in one instance ten to one was bet on our boys by a citizen of Boonsboro." The correspondent described each inning and a few "laughable" incidents. One of the Marshall players accidentally slipped out of his shoe and left it at first base, "creating much fun for the crowd. And then their Captain . . . turned a somersault, in mockery of a fall our 'blacksmith' got in making a desperate run for the ball. . . . The smith returned to his base with a defiant, confident air, and the game went on."

The match was a well-contested, narrow victory for the Fort Dodge Wahkonsa Club, by a score of 29-24. As the team's player/blacksmith said, "We scooped them."

Baseball had arrived in a glorious fashion in Iowa. ♦

Author John Liepa has taught history (Iowa and U.S.) and political science at Des Moines Area Community College for 34 years.

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Almost all of the information for this article was gleaned from Iowa community newspapers, 1850-1870. In Des Moines, John Zeller's many years of poring over 19th-century newspapers saved the author hundreds of research hours; Merle Davis of Iowa City also researched baseball in many newspapers. The author's wife, Dianne, and son Torey provided assistance, encouragement, and support in numerous ways.

### Base Ball on the Brain (to be sung to the minstrel tune "Ham Fat"; printed in the *Daily State Register*, September 27, 1867)

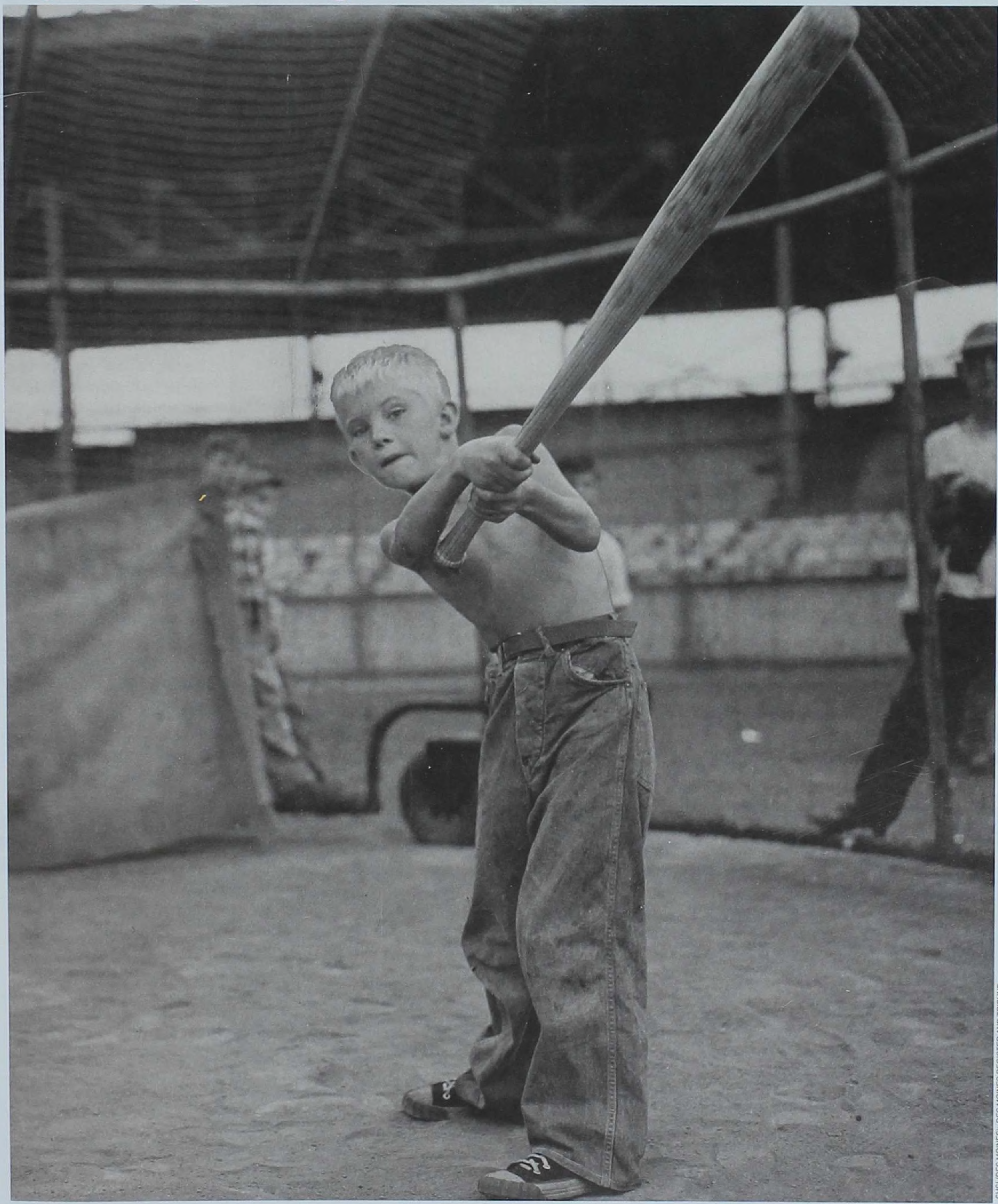
At length the war cry's hushed and still,  
And peaceful are the signs,  
The cannon's roar affrights us not—  
"All quiet on the lines"  
No more the fearful charge we brave—  
For raids we look in vain,  
But still excitement we must have,  
And we've base ball on the brain!

... And there's the little urchin, too,  
With importance he is great,  
As he holds his "bat" invitingly,  
Just knee-high o'er the "plate."  
The "pitcher sends a whirling 'ball,'"   
For a "skyer" he is fain,  
But "foul" the "Umpire" loudly calls,  
With base ball on the brain!

... The girls, too, aping lordly man,  
Have taken up the chase,  
And with Bloomer pants and gaiters high,  
They fly from "base" to "base!"  
In faith, I think the truth to tell,  
There's none of us quite sane,  
But that we all have Poplar Lawn!  
And base ball on the brain!



*A passion for the game . . .*

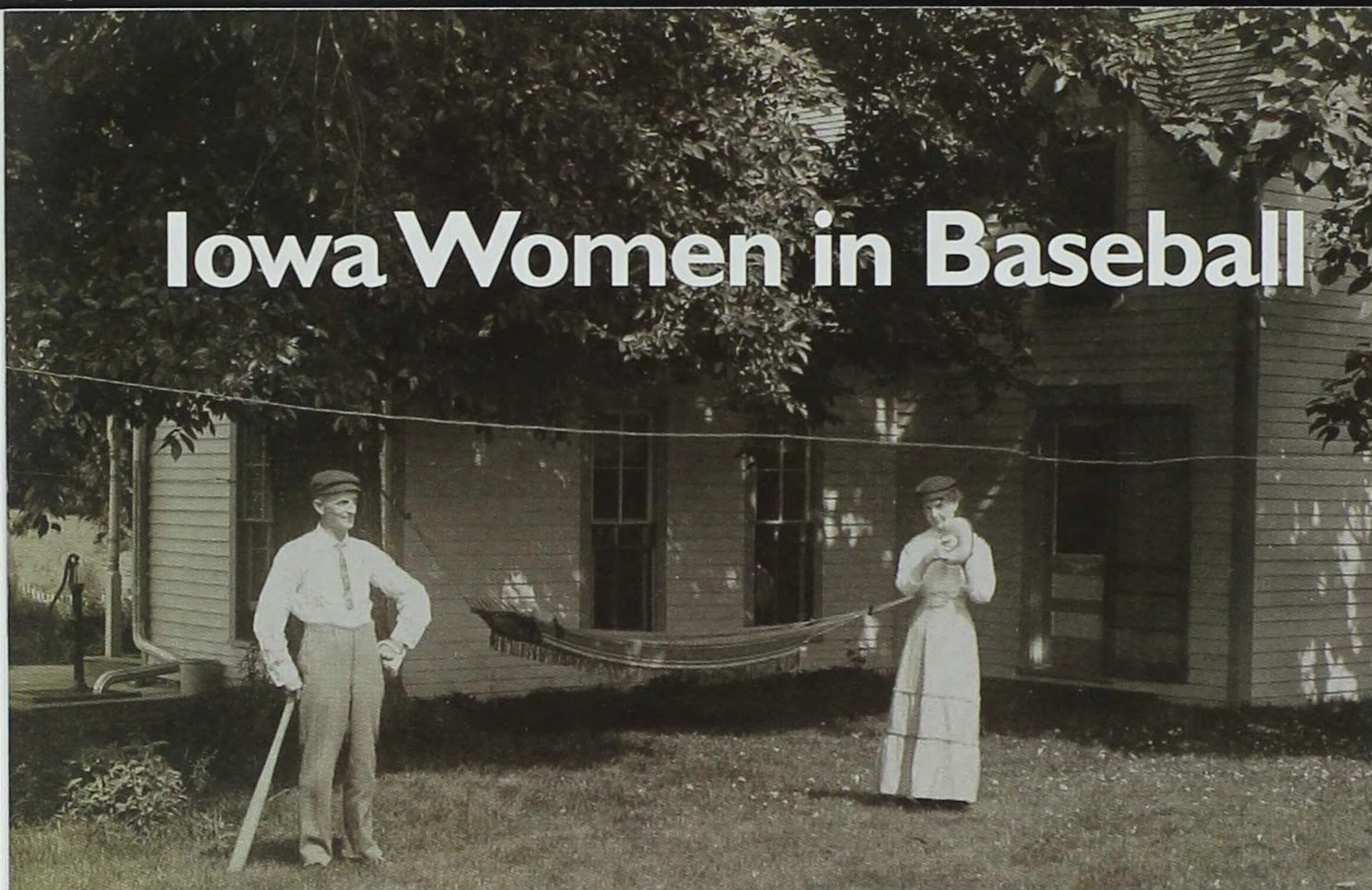


SHS (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

With a large stadium as backdrop, ten-year-old Charley Pike chokes up on the bat and eyes the outfield (1949).



# Iowa Women in Baseball



SHSI (DES MOINES)

by Ginalie Swaim

Left: A long skirt didn't hamper this Victorian woman from catching hits at the turn of the century. A hammock in the background awaits the tired ball players. Below: an unidentified team in softball trousers, in 1937.

A sportswriter from the *Iowa State Register* was one of 1,500 fans watching an 1892 baseball game in Des Moines. A New York women's team was taking on a local team of male department store clerks sponsored by Younkers Brothers, and the reporter wisecracked: "While it was not a very scientific and skillful game on the part of the young ladies it was a very amusing one. The pitcher and catcher were very good, but whenever a ball was knocked into their outfield, the crowd would nearly go into convulsions. . . . The players arranged themselves in a line and by the first tossing the ball to the second and second to the third and so on, they would finally get the ball inside

the diamond. Such a scene reminded one of the old-fashioned fire bucket brigades. . . . The young ladies, however, play a very good game, when the fact is taken in mind that it is an absolute and natural impossibility for a woman to play base ball. . . . A ball team composed of wooden Indians and clothing store dummies could come as near."

It took a while for female ball players to gain respect and a foothold in Iowa. In 1912, women students at the State University of Iowa in Iowa City were playing softball, organized by the Women's Athletic Association (WAA), according to historians Leah Rogers and Clare Kernek. But the 1923 university yearbook ac-



SHSI (IOWA CITY)





**Nursing trainees in 1942 in Des Moines determine who will bat first. Right: The Albia-Hiteman kittenball team (circa 1930s).**

knowledge that WAA's "vaudeville entertainments" and monthly social events "more than anything else [helped] to put the organization in its present place on the campus."

Participation in the sport grew. By 1939 and 1940, 75 women's teams across Iowa played in the state's AAA softball division.

Two women with Iowa connections played in the 1940s and 1950s All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). With a nod to wartime patriotism, the league was started in 1943 by Chicago businessman P. K. Wrigley. Wrigley was concerned that the war would drain male players from the major leagues and thus empty major league ball parks. He developed the AAGPBL as a fallback: if the major leagues folded, women's teams would play on these diamonds and maintain public interest in baseball. AAGPBL teams were placed in midwestern war-production cities, where factory workers could attend local games despite gas rationing. In 1945 a writer noted, "Not long ago, girl's baseball rated along with checkers for spectator interest. Now there are nights when you have to stand up in back to see what's going on at the plate."

Iowan Betty Francis played on AAGPBL teams in Muskegon, Kalamazoo, and South Bend from 1949 to 1954, when the league ended. Francis was born in Maquoketa, Iowa, and had played ball on the school team in nearby Monmouth. Inez Voyce was on the South Bend Blue Sox and the Grand Rapids Chicks from 1946 to 1953. She had played ball at Seymour High School in Wayne County, Iowa. She graduated in 1941 and then served as a second-class yeoman in the navy before joining the league. A left-hander, Voyce played first base. "I was playing softball with boys since I was old enough to walk," she said.

In the 1970s, several Iowa City feminists began organizing softball teams. According to Susan Birrell and Diana M. Richter, sports studies experts who researched these teams in the 1980s, "Any feminist can tell you that

if you are a stranger in town on a hot summer evening and you want to find the feminist community, you should head for the nearest softball diamond." Early teams comprised feminists in various Iowa City arenas: the Blue Stockings (the academic community at the University of Iowa), Grace and Rubie's Rats (a women-owned coffee shop); Plainswomen (a feminist bookstore); WRAC (the Women's Resource and Action Center); and Emma Goldman (a women's health collective). The teams "provided evidence of the strength of women's culture in Iowa City," Birrell and Richter note. They formed to "shape sport into a practice which has relevance within their lives." The women valued friendship, sensitivity, and good times rather than competition and victories. As one coach emphasized, "There's a lot of support for people trying, and people don't really get upset with mistakes and the criticism is relatively supportive."

For high school girls, softball was added to sports programs in 1955 (joining basketball), but "what really made the state [softball] tournament blossom was the [Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union's] decision in 1970 to anchor it in Fort Dodge at the Rogers Sports Complex," according to writer Chuck Offenburger in *E. Wayne Cooley and the Iowa Girl*. The sport grew in participation and popularity. In 2002, the union's executive director Troy Dannen told Offenburger that the girls' tournament draws thousands. The fans "sit between fields and see each pitch of both games. Between games, they return to the outdoor grills for brats or burgers or chicken, but they have to hurry," Dannen explained. "The park staff has diamonds ready within 10 minutes after a game ends, and it's time to play ball again. And the greatest treat for softball fans is that the same thing happens the next night." ❖

*The author is the editor of Iowa Heritage Illustrated.*



*A passion for the game . . .*



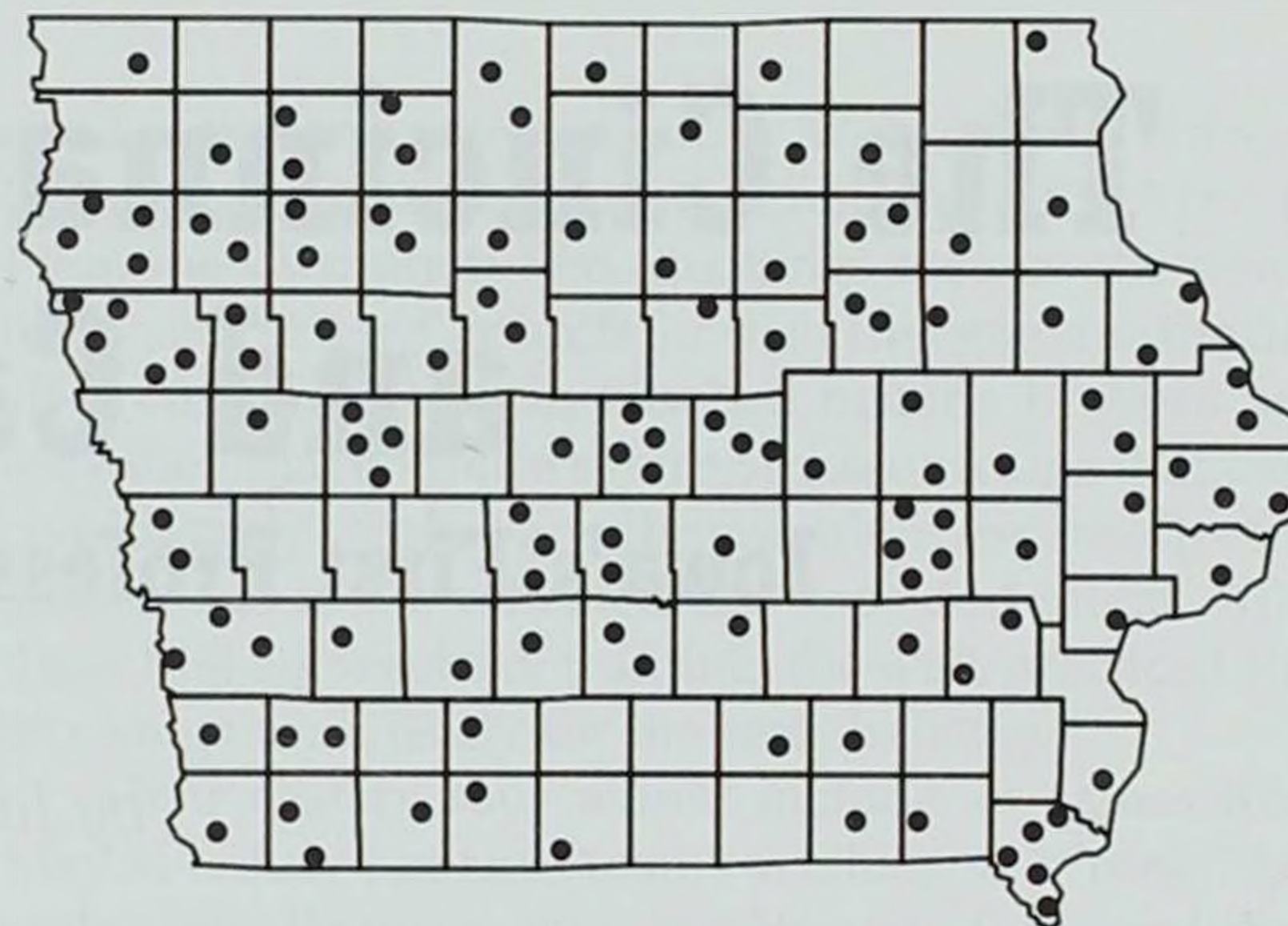
**Early baseball:** A carved baseball, bat, and straw hat on an 1880 grave marker make a poignant statement about the importance of baseball to a young child or perhaps a parent. The marker is in the Lowaville cemetery, in northwestern Van Buren County. The boy and his two siblings all died within a few days,



# Hometowns of Iowa's Major Leaguers

MORE THAN 200 IOWA MEN have attained the ultimate goal of playing in the major leagues. Six are honored in baseball's Hall of Fame; others played only a few games, a few innings, or even less—as the 19th-century expression put it, “they stopped in for a cup of coffee.” Iowa's major leaguers have come from three-quarters of our counties, from small towns like Pisgah and Cascade, and from larger cities. Some of their hometowns no longer exist (such as Clay's Grove and Knowlton); some have fewer than 200 citizens. Bancroft, Lost Nation, Neola, and Norway—all with populations below 1,000—each produced two or more major leaguers.

Iowa baseball historian Jerry Clark describes it well: “The Iowans who played major league baseball represent a broad cross-section. . . . Boys from both rural and urban Iowa honed their talents on hometown diamonds and worked up to the major league fields. For some reason, a good many of these Iowa boys found their niche on the pitching mound. Some were stars; others were journeymen ballplayers filling in where they



could. For some, baseball was a short interlude in their lives; others made a lifelong career of playing, coaching, umpiring, or scouting. Many came back to Iowa and took up jobs as farmers, laborers, businessmen and teachers. Some became more famous in other fields of endeavor. . . . All had their day in the sun.” Their hometowns appear below (although the actual birthplace may have been a different Iowa town). —by John Liepa

Ackley: Arthur Reinhart  
Algona: William Salisbury,  
David Skaugstad, George  
Stueland  
Ames: Stephen Dreyer,  
Robert Harris, Billy Sunday  
Ankeny: Todd Sears  
Atlantic: Rick Heiserman  
Aurelia: Wesley Siglin  
Bancroft: Joseph Hatten,  
Denis Menke  
Bellevue: Marvin Felderman  
Blanchard: Don Ragan  
Bloomfield: John Rawlings  
Boone: Charles Brown,  
Gerald McNertney  
Breda: Verle Tiefenthaler  
Brighton: Louis Nordyke  
Burlington: James Dunegan,  
Jack Hamilton, Steve  
Macko, Rodney Nichols,  
James Panther, Matt Perisho  
Carroll: Kenneth Henderson  
Cascade: Urban Faber  
Cedar Falls: Matthew Wagner  
Cedar Rapids: Calvin  
Eldred, Benjamin Ford,  
Nate Frese, William Hoffer,  
Wes Obermueller,  
Richard Rozek, Shawn  
Sedlacek, Cy Slapnicka,  
Gregory Thayer, John  
Wathan, Earl Whitehill  
Charles City: Vivian Lindaman  
Cherokee: Stephen Melter  
Clarion: Lee Handley  
Clay's Grove: Samuel Carroll  
Clemons: Verne James Clemons  
Clinton: Thomas Hilgendorf

Coalville: James Grant,  
Clifford Knox  
Conway: Lyndon Welday  
Coon Rapids: Jay King Towne  
Council Bluffs: Stanley  
Bahnsen, Jonathan Lieber  
Creston: Harold Smith  
Croton: Otto Saltzgaver  
Danbury: Raymond Haley  
Davenport: Eugene Baker,  
Michael Busch, Michael  
Butcher, Josh D. Kroeger,  
Adolph Lorenzen, Thomas  
Lundstedt, Scott Pose,  
Thomas Walsh, Mitch Wylie  
Des Moines: Todd Belitz,  
Casey Blake, Ed Courtney,  
Thomas Drees, Jerry  
Hairston, James W.  
Holmes, Joseph Magrane,  
Mike Mahoney, Richard  
Manville, Hermas McFar-  
land, Benjamin Sampson,  
Kevin Tapani  
De Witt: Danny Moeller  
Donnellson: Alfred Lawson  
Dorchester: Nathaniel  
Kellogg  
Dubuque: Charles Buelow,  
Frederick Glade, Joseph  
Hoerner, Edward Keas,  
William McWilliams, Kevin  
Rhomberg  
Elkader: John Dittmer  
Everly: Luvern Fear  
Farnhamville: Frederick Stanley  
Forest City: Luther Owens  
Barnes  
Fort Dodge: Louis Fiene,

Eugene Ford, James Long,  
William Metzger, Michael  
Schwabe, Kevin Wickander  
Foster: Roy Wilson  
George: Robert Locker  
Glidden: Albert Epperly  
Graettinger: Guilford  
Paulsen  
Grundy Center: Robert  
Hasbrook  
Hamburg: Carl Stimson  
Harper: Philip Slattery  
Holstein: Foster Edwards,  
Wilbur Wehde  
Humboldt: John Thompson  
Ida Grove: Harry Eells,  
George Pipgras  
Indianola: Casey Blake  
Iowa City: Craig Colbert,  
Leo Meyer  
Jesup: William Wagner  
Keokuk: Jeremiah  
Harrington, Rollin Lutz  
Kingsley: Harry Gaspar  
Knowlton: Clarence Yaryan  
Lacona: David G. Baker  
Lamoni: Edward Watt  
Laurens: Adrian Lynch  
Lawton: Arnold Anderson  
Le Grand: John Coombs  
Le Mars: Walter Marbet  
Linn Grove: Richard  
Grapenthin  
Logan: Harold McKain  
Lost Nation: James  
McAndrew, George Stone  
Lowden: Frederick Schmidt  
Mallard: Frank Mulroney  
Malvern: Dakin Miller

Manchester: Walter McCredie  
Marengo: Paul Hinrichs  
Marshalltown: Adrian  
Anson, Maurice Kent,  
Samuel B. Sager  
Mason City: Donald Eddy,  
Timothy Laudner, Ronald  
Miller, Frank Secory  
Maxwell: Clyde Southwick  
Middle Amana: William  
Zuber  
Milton: Wayne McLeland  
Monticello: James Crabb  
Montrose: Calvin McVey  
Muscatine: Albert Gould  
Neola: Jerome Downs,  
James Morgan  
New Hampton: Duane  
Josephson  
Newton: Nate Teut  
North English: Mace Brown  
Norway: Michael Boddicker,  
Bruce Kimm, Harold  
Trosky  
Oakland: Leo Bohlen  
Oelwein: Richard Woodson  
Orient: Clarence Vance  
Osage: Robert Brush, Jesse  
Duryea  
Ottumwa: Robert Lee,  
Henry Ostdieck, Jacob  
Weimer  
Parkersburg: Roy Luebke  
Parnell: Edward Gharrity  
Paullina: Arthur Ewold  
Pella: Kory DeHaan  
Perry: George Tomer  
Peterson: Roscoe Holm  
Pisgah: Loren Rolland Babe

Pocahontas: Lawrence  
Biittner  
Popejoy: Charles Frisbee  
Preston: Robert Oldis  
Red Oak: Richard Kenworthy  
Remsen: Joseph Lotz, John  
Niggeling  
Riverside: Vance McIlree  
Sac City: Paul Zahniser  
Salix: Donald Black  
Schleswig: Edward Pipgras  
Shenandoah: Milo Marshall  
Sioux City: David J. Ban-  
croft, David Edler, Richard  
Green, Robert Knoop,  
Robert Mattick, Donald  
Wengert  
Smithland: George Clark  
Storm Lake: George Decker  
Story City: Henry Severeid  
Struble: Arthur Jahn  
Sumner: Les Tiedje  
Toledo: Leonard Cole  
Van Meter: Bob Feller  
Victor: Jack Collum  
Villisca: Lynn King  
Vinton: Edmund Miller,  
Ralph Miller  
Waterloo: Jack Bruner,  
Richard Folkers, Richard  
Weik  
Waukee: Harold Manders  
Waverly: Andrew Hinch  
Wesley: George Fisher  
Winterset: Fred Clarke  
Wyoming: Emil Levens  
Unknown Iowa hometown:  
George Crosby, Charlie  
Hodnett



# The Cincinnati Red Stockings and Cal McVey

## Iowa's First Professional Baseball Player

by John Liepa

**H**e is powerfully built," the *Cincinnati Daily Times* noted, with "broad shoulders and barrel chest . . . handsome though shy, and is a favorite of the ladies. He is very conscientious and a hard worker . . . a good fielder, but his strength is with the ash in his hands . . . he is a long . . . good thrower . . . and he doesn't drink."

The baseball player the newspaper described was Cal McVey, the first Iowa-born professional baseball player. His versatility—he played every position on the field—made him a highly sought-after team member. And he played on baseball's first professional team, which also completed the longest winning streak in the history of the game.

Calvin Alexander McVey was born August 30, 1850, in Montrose, six miles upstream from Keokuk. His family had arrived in Iowa shortly after statehood in 1846. His father farmed and tried his hand at carpentry, but after a few years of disappointment and economic difficulty, the family moved to Indianapolis, where Calvin's father became a respectable piano maker.

"Mac"—the nickname Calvin acquired in his teens—was introduced to baseball in Indianapolis, where it was flourishing. While pursuing his college degree, he quickly established himself as a key player on the University of Indianapolis team, and his priorities changed from academics to what would become the love of his life, baseball. He devoted the next two years



A rare image of Iowan Calvin McVey, 1874 (?).

to two Indianapolis amateur clubs, the Actives and the Westerns. In 1867, the Westerns played a highly publicized game against the top-ranked Washington (D.C.) Nationals. The Nationals won, 106–21. (High scores were common in early games, for several reasons. Pitchers delivered the kind of pitch a batter requested; outfielders wore no gloves; the fields were uneven; and games were longer than today.) Even though his team lost, McVey had gotten a solid hit in his first time at bat, but later in the game he injured his hand while trying to grab a hard-hit line drive. Nevertheless, his aggressive performance laid the foundation for his reputation as a competitive player. According to baseball's A. G. Spalding, "It was in this game that McVey, afterward to win enduring fame on the diamond, played at second base for the Westerns, and made his bow to the public as a future great one."

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati, a young businessman named Aaron Champion was adding his own name to baseball history. In 1868, Champion was president of the four-year-old Cincinnati Base Ball Club, originally an amateur club. For the next season, Champion asked the club's manager and pitcher, Harry Wright, to assemble a strong professional team, capable of competing with eastern clubs. Champion intended to pay salaries to the entire team.

The world of amateur baseball clubs strongly ar-



gued against paying players because, it was feared, that the sport would fall victim to corruption. In truth, paying players under the table was already happening in many clubs; so was betting. What distinguished Aaron Champion's bold plan was that rather than covertly paying players, he would pay salaries openly.

As Wright assembled players from other teams—only one was from Cincinnati—he learned about Calvin McVey and his fine performance with the Indianapolis Westerns. Most of Wright's new players had reputations as skilled players, but 18-year-old McVey was a huge risk. He had little baseball experience. Nobody knew what position he was best suited to play, so he was stuck in right field. And he was the youngest Red Stocking; his father had to sign the contract because Cal was still a minor. But McVey was also the team's strongest and most nimble player. He had fought as a bare-knuckles pugilist and was known to be a daredevil acrobat. The *Boston Times* once joked that McVey had "acquired considerable proficiency in his early days turning Catherine wheels and hand springs over the [Keokuk] rapids of the Mississippi. [He would] turn a flip-flap every time his club won." It also became known that McVey had a temper. Whenever a call was disputed, he was one of the first to leap into the fray, even if it meant disagreeing with his own teammates.

The first all-professional team was looked on as a novelty. As the 1869 season neared, very few East Coast prognosticators gave the Red Stockings much of a chance against well-established teams from New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, many of which had played since 1846. But the *New York Clipper* warned: "Contestants for the championship . . . will have to keep one eye turned toward Porkopolis" (Cincinnati's nickname, due to its stockyards).

As manager, Wright knew that part of making a national statement was to look like professionals. He had hired seamstress Bertha Betram to create stylish new uniforms. She chose a fabric called cricket flannel for the white jerseys. They were soft-collared and flared at the neck, with an eye-catching, bright red, Gothic letter C stitched on the front bib. She fashioned white knickers with a clasp below the knee (the players could run faster in knickers than in longer, restricting pants, and other teams soon copied the style). The stark white uniforms were accentuated by red stockings—the source of the team's new name. Baseball writer Henry Chadwick described the Red Stockings' garb as a "comfortably cool, tasteful uniform."

With the opening game upon them, the team looked

good. The fans were anxious. An exotically dressed zouave band was ready to add excitement. On April 17, 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings took to the newly renovated Union Grounds for their first game as the first all-professional club in baseball history. In April and May they played midwestern amateur teams that were considerably weaker, and the cumulative score after five games, 248 to 36, reflected this lopsided talent. After these first six weeks of training, the well-practiced Red Stockings were ready for the real challenge.

Their eastern tour would include 23 games from May 31 to July 1 against teams in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and West Virginia. The real test would be four particular teams—the New York Atlantics and Philadelphia's Athletics, Olympics, and Keystones. As the Red Stockings left Cincinnati by train on the morning of May 31, few fans knew that the team left with two hung-over players who had violated club rules, an injured catcher, short tempers, and very little money (at the last minute, \$300 was borrowed from a club member's wife's savings).

In 21 games in 30 days, the Red Stockings defeated the best teams in America. They trounced the Springfield (Massachusetts) Mutuals, 80–5; thrashed the Wheeling (West Virginia) Baltics, 44–0, in just three innings; and won a victory over the Troy (New York) Haymakers, 37–3. Their only real defensive struggle was a narrow 4–2 win over the New York City Mutuals. The *Cincinnati Daily Times* hailed it as the "greatest game on record" with "the largest assemblage of spectators ever seen on a ball field in this country. . . . The New Yorkers are beginning to take this 'country' club seriously."

As the team's successes mounted, camaraderie developed. Their long train trips between cities and shorter carriage rides to ball parks were occasionally interrupted by spirited outbursts of singing (to the tune of the Confederate song "Bonnie Blue Flag"):

We are a band of baseball players  
From "Cincinnati City;"  
We come to toss the ball around,  
And sing to you our ditty.  
And if you listen to our song  
We are about to sing,  
We'll tell you all about baseball  
And make the welkin ring.

Hurrah! Hurrah!  
For the noble game, hurrah!  
"Red Stockings" all will toss the ball,  
And shout our loud hurrah.

Our Captain is a goodly man,



And Harry is his name;  
 Whate'er he does, 'tis always "Wright,"  
 So says the voice of fame.  
 And as the Pitcher of our nine,  
 We think he can't be beat;  
 In many a fight, old Harry Wright  
 Has saved us from defeat. . . .

According to most accounts, the leaders of these impromptu songs were Andy Leonard, Charlie Sweasy, and Calvin McVey—the Iowa-born son of a piano maker.

One of the highlights of the eastern tour was the game on June 25 against the Nationals in Washington, D.C. According to the *Cincinnati Daily Times*, heads of government bureaus offered their clerks brief leaves of absence to attend the game. Numerous dignitaries and 8,000 spectators watched as the Red Stockings routed the Nationals, 24–8. The next day, escorted by the vanquished team and riding in a large coach drawn by six gaily decorated horses, the Red Stockings arrived at the White House. The president greeted them: "I believe you warmed the Washington boys somewhat yesterday." For 18-year-old McVey, born in tiny Montrose, Iowa, meeting Civil War hero and American president Ulysses S. Grant must have been an awe-inspiring and unforgettable experience.

As the Red Stockings continued on undefeated, their national celebrity grew. Easterners lamented losing su-

periority to this young upstart team, but as baseball writer Henry Chadwick acknowledged in the *New York Clipper*, "Westward the base ball empire wends its way."

On July 1, an exuberant parade welcomed the triumphant Red Stockings back to Cincinnati. At an exhibition game they were presented a grand trophy of sorts—a 27-foot wooden bat weighing 1,600 pounds. The lumber company president who made the presentation said that the Cincinnati nine had a reputation as heavy hitters, and now they had the bat to match. They won the exhibition game, 53–11, and then enjoyed a fine banquet. Aaron Champion proclaimed that he would rather be president of the Cincinnati Base Ball Club than the president of the United States.

Throughout July and August, the Red Stockings dominated all opponents. On August 27, they again played the Troy Haymakers in what would be the only blemish on an undefeated season. The game ended in a 17–17 tie, but after the Haymakers left the field in protest of some of the umpire's decisions, the umpire declared the Red Stockings the winners.

Having beaten every club in the Northeast and the Midwest, it was not surprising that the team was now invited to play the best clubs in the San Francisco area. They immediately accepted. A West Coast team represented a significant investment. Only a team of the Red Stockings' stature could attract enough spectators to provide a return on the investment for both the host

clubs and the Red Stockings. According to historians Greg Rhodes and John Erardi, "Clearly their experiment in fielding an all-professional nine had been vindicated. No other baseball team in America could have been invited to California except the Red Stockings. No other club had the record, the reputation, nor the drawing power to be considered for such a journey. Nor would such a tour even have been contemplated before the Red Stockings' amazing season of 1869 revived the country's flagging interest in the game." Watching amateur games was no longer exciting; the public wanted more.

The team left Cincinnati on September 14, stopping in St. Louis to crush the Unions, 70–9, and the Empires, 31–9. Perhaps amidst the revelry, as the team briefly passed through Council Bluffs, McVey



A giant bat is presented to the Red Stockings on their triumphant return home.



thought about his birthplace and early home in Montrose, on the eastern border of Iowa.

"The boys boarded a stage coach for the final leg into Omaha," Rhodes and Erardi write. "Gould, and Taylor sat on the very top with the baggage, George Wright and McVey took seats next to the driver, and the rest of the party climbed inside, wedged in with other passengers. What a sight! The champion ball club in America bouncing over the rough trail aboard a crowded stage coach, swaying this way and that, leaning out windows, perched on top of the stage and the driver's platform."

After a promise to play Omaha on the return trip, the Red Stockings headed west. They were the first baseball team to travel on the new transcontinental railroad, completed that May. A warm, enthusiastic reception awaited them in San Francisco. They responded with a complete demolition of three San Francisco teams, by a cumulative score of 289-22. It seemed that the highlights of the western excursion had been the Red Stockings' first sightings of buffalo, prairie dogs, and Sioux Indians, not the mediocre San Francisco competition.

On the return trip, the Red Stockings kept their promise and played Omaha, destroying them by 64 points, while U.S. Vice President Schuyler Colfax watched. A dog fight during the game distracted so many bored fans and gamblers that the Red Stockings officials threatened to leave the field if order wasn't restored.

In early November, the team defeated their most respected and feared rivals, the New York Mutuals, 17-8, thus completing a perfect season by a professional baseball team, with a record of 57 wins and 0 losses (Some historians count exhibition games as well as officially sanctioned games, for a record of 65 wins.) The team had proved that an all-professional team could succeed both financially and on the field. The meticulous team captain Harry Wright compiled the final statistics for the 1869 season. He tallied 2,396 runs and 222 miles ran between bases. The team's highest score in a single game was 103; the lowest, 4. They had scored 40 runs in a single inning and only struck out 8 times. They had traveled 11,977 miles, playing before 200,000 spectators.

Over the winter, numerous teams tried to recruit Red Stockings players, but wisely, Aaron Champion already had had them sign contracts in the fall. Wright made sure his players stayed fit. "I have the players here now in far better form than they were this time a year ago," he wrote to his friend Harry Chadwick. "They are all members of the gymnasium here and exercise daily; and if I can only induce them to keep it up, I think, when we go East this season, we will be able to play a game or games of ball that will keep up our reputation."

After a rain-delayed start, the 1870 season opened on April 18 with an easily won exhibition game, 34-5. Then, like a juggernaut, the Red Stockings destroyed all opponents across six states. Was there no team left that could give the Red Stockings a serious challenge?

The answer came on June 14, a warm, sunny day in New York, where the very talented Brooklyn Atlantics were led by their very talented catcher Bob Ferguson, nicknamed "Death to Flying Things." Between 12,000 and 15,000 spectators filled the stands. After the regulation nine innings, the teams were tied, 5-5. If accepted by both teams, the tie would end the game. If either insisted on continuing, the game would have to be completed. The Red Stockings insisted. Ironically, their two-year, 81-game winning streak ended.

Aaron Champion telegraphed Cincinnati: "ATLANTICS 8, CINCINNATI 7. THE FINEST GAME EVER PLAYED. OUR BOYS DID NOBLY, BUT FORTUNE WAS AGAINST US. ELEVEN INNINGS PLAYED. THOUGH BEATEN, NOT DISGRACED."

Their aura of invincibility evaporated. Other teams now rose to the challenge, and by season's end on November 5, the Red Stockings had suffered 5 more losses and 1 tie. But what an amazing run it had been: an undefeated 1869 season followed by a series of 24 victories in 1870. Their two-year record was an unbelievable 124 wins, 6 losses, and 1 tie.

Somewhat spoiled by success, Cincinnati fans laid blame for the losses on captain and center fielder Harry Wright and his brother, shortstop George Wright. Complaints about the players' salary structure, and charges of mismanagement and greed surfaced. Problems off the field, including drinking and other flagrant violations of club rules, led to speculation that the club would be reorganized in 1871. The local press didn't help the situation either, suggesting that some of the players had become lackadaisical, and grouching about the increase in ticket prices from 25 to 50 cents (though Champion needed the extra revenue to match or exceed salaries offered to his players by other teams). The last straw was when both club president Champion and club secretary John Joyce resigned.

It was later revealed that two factions had emerged on the team regarding drinking and discipline. Harry and George Wright, Charlie Gould, and possibly Calvin McVey favored teetotaling; Asa Brainard, Charlie Sweasy, Fred Waterman, Doug Allison, and Andy Leonard were on the other side.

The Cincinnati team's stockholders voted to return to amateur status. Meanwhile, other baseball clubs were making substantial offers to some of the Cincinnati players. Harry Wright became captain and secretary of a





McVey (back row, far left) and the formidable Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1875.

Boston team with the same name, the Red Stockings. His brother George, Gould, and McVey, joined him.

What was the legacy of the Cincinnati Red Stockings and their two amazing years? The team revolutionized baseball. Their success helped bring about the March 1871 formation of the first professional league—the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players. According to Rhodes and Erardi, “The 1869 team revived interest in the sport and promoted it to a level never imagined before. The Red Stockings also proved, contrary to popular opinion of the time, that the professional team concept could succeed. . . . They demonstrated that the public cared much more about excellent play and honest effort than it did about the professional or amateur status of the players. . . . To Aaron Champion and Harry Wright go the credit for casting the mold for the professional sports team . . . they established that the all-salaried club, the scouting and training of junior-level players, regular training procedures, systematically conducted practices, and carefully devised strategies and teamwork could produce results far superior to any system that had been tried.”

The career of Iowa’s native son Cal McVey continued to blossom. On the Boston team in 1871, he batted an exceptional .421, and Boston finished in second place (and first in 1872). In 1873, he played almost every position for the Lord Baltimores and became at age 22 baseball’s youngest manager. The club finished third, 23–14, and McVey batted an outstanding .380. His baseball odyssey took him back to Boston for two more years

of success. In 1874, he led the league in hits, total bases, RBIs, and runs, and he finished second in batting average at .359. The 1875 season was almost a carbon copy—Boston again finished first and McVey again led the league in many categories.

It is ironic, then, that when he and the Boston Red Stockings came to Iowa to play the Keokuk Westerns on June 10, 1875, the local press overlooked their native son. Keokuk’s *Daily Gate City*, a paper that followed baseball closely, covered the game at length, inning by inning. But there was no fanfare, acknowledgment, or even mention of Cal McVey. Granted, he had a lack-

luster performance that afternoon, going hitless in two at-bats with five put-outs and one assist, but the versatile professional McVey was at the peak of his career. Did no one in Keokuk know that this amazing 24-year-old player was born only six miles away?

The next year McVey jumped to the Chicago White Stockings and again delivered a first-place finish. But after a disappointing fifth place in 1877, he decided to return to where it had all begun—a two-year stint with the now renamed Cincinnati Reds. McVey led the team to a respectable second-place finish, but then the team dropped to fifth in 1879.

After eleven years of professional baseball, at age 29, Calvin McVey left major league ball and headed to California. The West had fascinated him when the Red Stockings traveled there in 1869, and there he settled for the rest of his life. He organized, managed, and played for the Bay City Athletics and the San Francisco Pioneers. In 1885 he retired from the sport. Throughout his 17-year career, he seemed to have brought the Midas touch to teams he played for and managed. He was a winner and he produced winners.

Unfortunately, the Midas touch didn’t carry over to his life after baseball. In 1906, his wife was seriously injured and his home destroyed by the great San Francisco earthquake. He lived in a small shack and depended on charities for food and clothing. Seven years later, a 30-foot fall in a Nevada mine where he was working crippled him. Limited to part-time jobs, he worked as a night watchman for a lumber company for ten years.



Former Red Stocking teammate Doug Allison petitioned the National League for medical and financial assistance for McVey, but only minimal and strictly personal aid was given. The rest of his life was one of struggle and severe economic hardship.

His one final moment of glory was the 50th anniversary of baseball's first professional team. He was invited to return to Cincinnati as an honored guest on the eve of the Reds taking on the Chicago White Sox in the infamous 1919 World Series. Sixty-nine-year-old McVey, George Wright, and Oak Taylor proudly rode in a parade as part of the celebration. They were the only surviving team members of the 1869 Red Stockings.

Calvin Alexander McVey died on August 20, 1926, in San Francisco. In 1968, he was inducted into Iowa's

Sports Hall of Fame. One of the great baseball biographers, Frederick Ivor-Campbell, said it well: "Cal McVey began his professional career at age 18 with the famous Cincinnati Red Stockings of 1869, and quickly became one of the brightest lights in the game's first decade of openly professional play." ♦

*Author John Liepa is a 20-year member of the Society for American Baseball Research, has collected baseball cards and memorabilia for more than 50 years, and does presentations dressed as 1869 Cincinnati Red Stocking Calvin McVey.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources for this article include Arthur Bartlett, *Baseball and Mr. Spalding* (NY: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951); Darryl Brock, *If I Never Get Back* (NY: Penguin Putnam, 1998); Jerry E. Clark, *Anson to Zuber: Iowa Boys in the Major Leagues* (Omaha: Making History, 1992); Christopher Devine, *Harry Wright: The Father of Professional Base Ball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003); Harry Ellard, *Baseball in Cincinnati* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); Stephen D. Guschov, *The Red Stockings of Cincinnati: Baseball's First All-Professional Team* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); Greg Rhodes and John Erardi, *The First Boys of Summer* (Cincinnati: Road West Publishing Co., 1994); William J. Ryczek, *Blackguards and Red Stockings* (Wallingford, CT: Colebrook Press, 1999); William J. Ryczek, *When Johnny Came Sliding Home: The Post-Civil War Baseball Boom, 1865-1870* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); and A. G. Spalding, *Baseball: America's National Game* (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1911).

## A passion for the game . . .

SHSI (IOWA CITY)

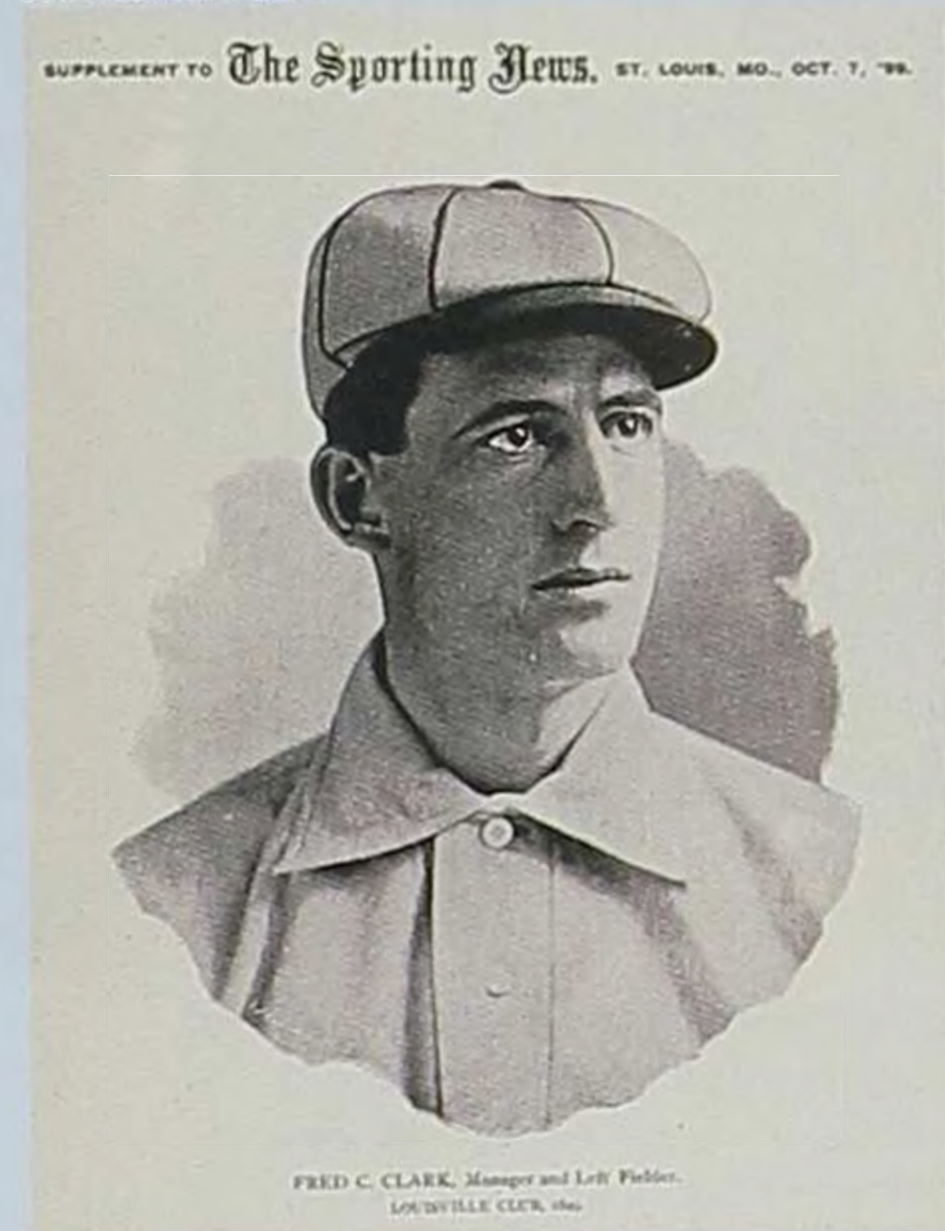
Duplicate agreement between Davenport  
Base Ball Association and W. C. McAlister.  
Witnessed, that said McAlister in consideration  
of Twenty (20) Dollars per month, agreed to  
be paid by the Association, agrees to play  
and practice Base Ball in the Nent of  
the Association in such positions as  
may be assigned him, and subject  
to all rules and regulations of the  
Association, for five months from May  
15<sup>th</sup> 1878, to October 15<sup>th</sup> 1878. This contract  
may be terminated by either party upon  
giving three days notice.  
Dated at Davenport Iowa, March 5<sup>th</sup> 1878.  
H. B. Fulton Manager  
Wm McAlister

**This rare, handwritten baseball contract was signed by William Cleaves McAlister in 1878. McAlister was a 20-year-old clerk in a Davenport pharmacy when he signed the contract to play on a Davenport team. His baseball salary was \$20 per month—at a time when a farm laborer earned a dollar a day.**



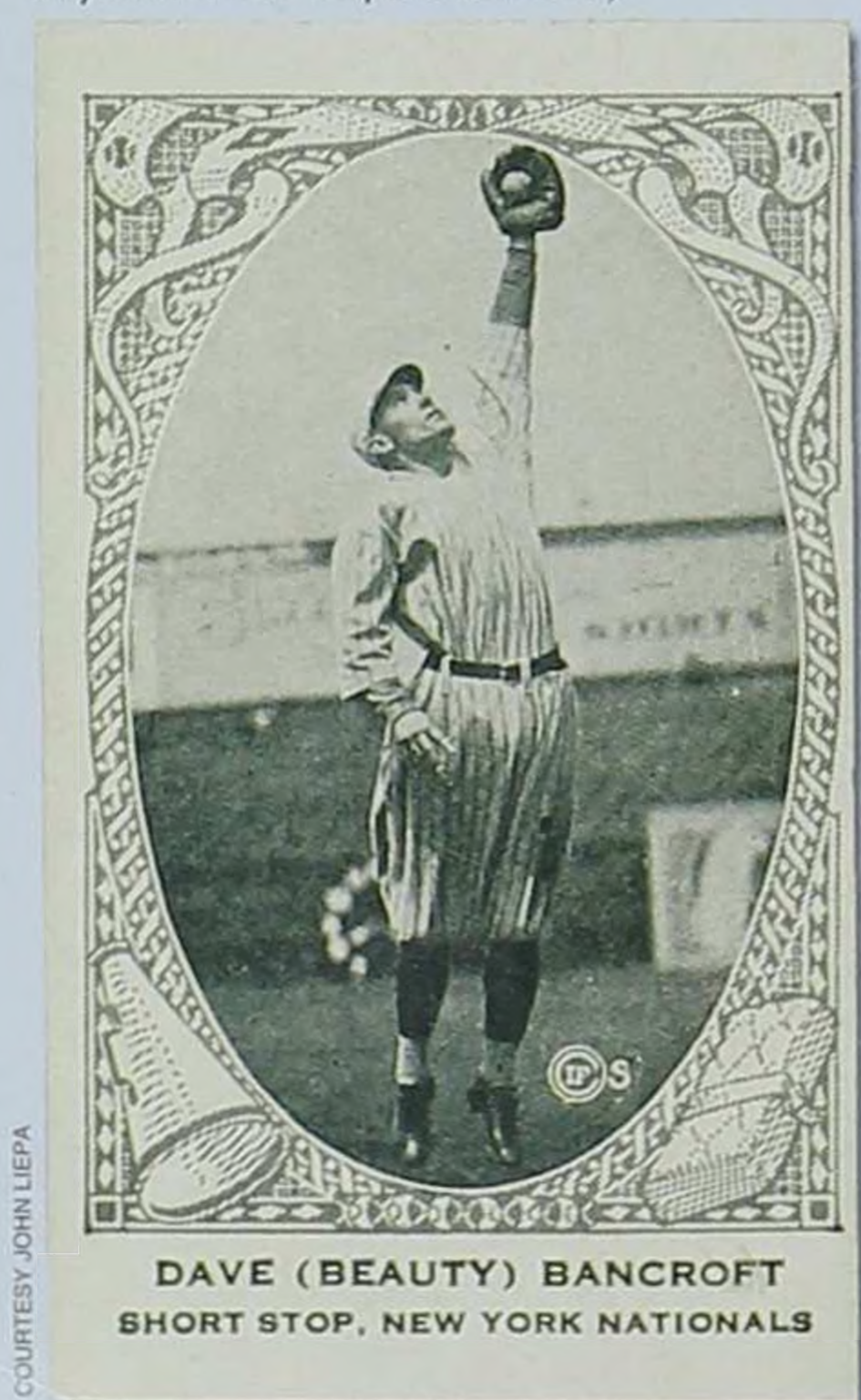
# Baseball Card Images of Iowa's Hall of Famers

COURTESY JOHN LIEPA



**Fred "Cap" Clarke:** b. 10-3-1872, Winterset; d. 8-14-1960, Winfield, Kansas. Outfielder for Louisville Colonels (National League), 1894-1899, and their player-manager, 1897-1899. Player-manager for Pittsburgh Pirates, 1900-1915. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, 1945. (Portrayed on 1899-1900 baseball card as supplement in Sporting News.)

**David J. "Beauty" Bancroft:** b. 4-20-1891, Sioux City; d. 10-9-1972, Superior, Wisconsin. Philadelphia Phillies in 1915; then played with three other teams through 1930. Player-manager with Boston Braves, 1924-1927. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, 1971. (Portrayed on 1922 strip card. W573)



COURTESY JOHN LIEPA

by John Liepa

COURTESY JOHN LIEPA

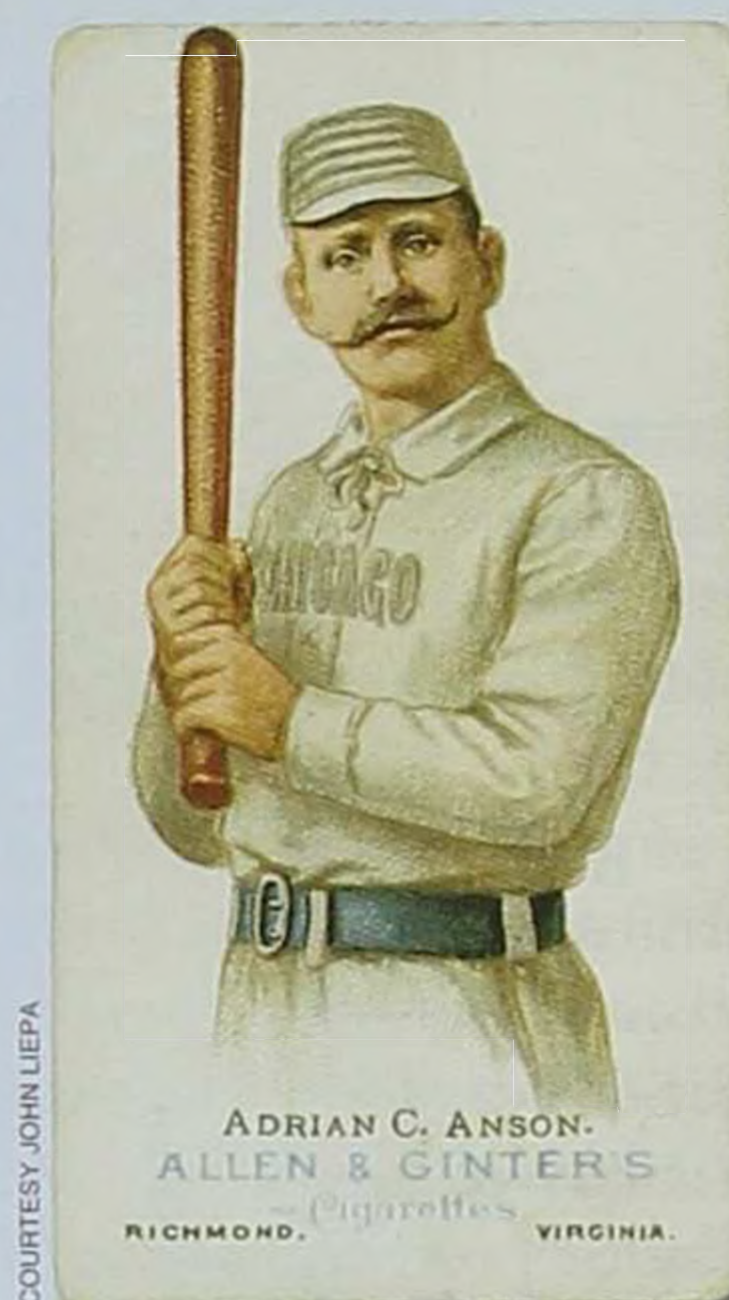


**Urban "Red" Faber:** b. 9-6-1888, Cascade; d. 9-25-1976, Chicago. Right-handed pitcher for Chicago White Sox, 1914-1933. Won 254 games in career. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, 1964. (Portrayed on 1933 Goudey Gum Co., Big League Chewing Gum baseball card. R319)

**James Leslie Wilkinson:** b. 5-14-1878, Algona; d. 8-21-1964, Kansas City, Missouri. In Iowa he was a pitcher and baseball entrepreneur. Principal owner of Kansas City Monarchs, 1920-1948. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, February 2006. (Photo dated 1924, not a baseball card. Story on Wilkinson begins on page 38.)



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY, COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.



COURTESY JOHN LIEPA

**Adrian "Cap" Anson:** b. 4-17-1852, Marshalltown; d. 4-14-1922, Chicago. Primarily a first baseman, played with Chicago Cubs, 1876-1897. For Chicago White Stockings, pitched two games in 1883 and one in 1884. Player-manager for Cubs franchise, 1879-1897. Managed New York Giants, 1898. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, 1939. (Portrayed here on 1887 Allen & Ginter series of "World's Champions" cards, packaged in boxes of ten cigarettes. Card series also included wrestlers, pool and billiards players, rifle shooters, pugilists, and oarsmen. N28)

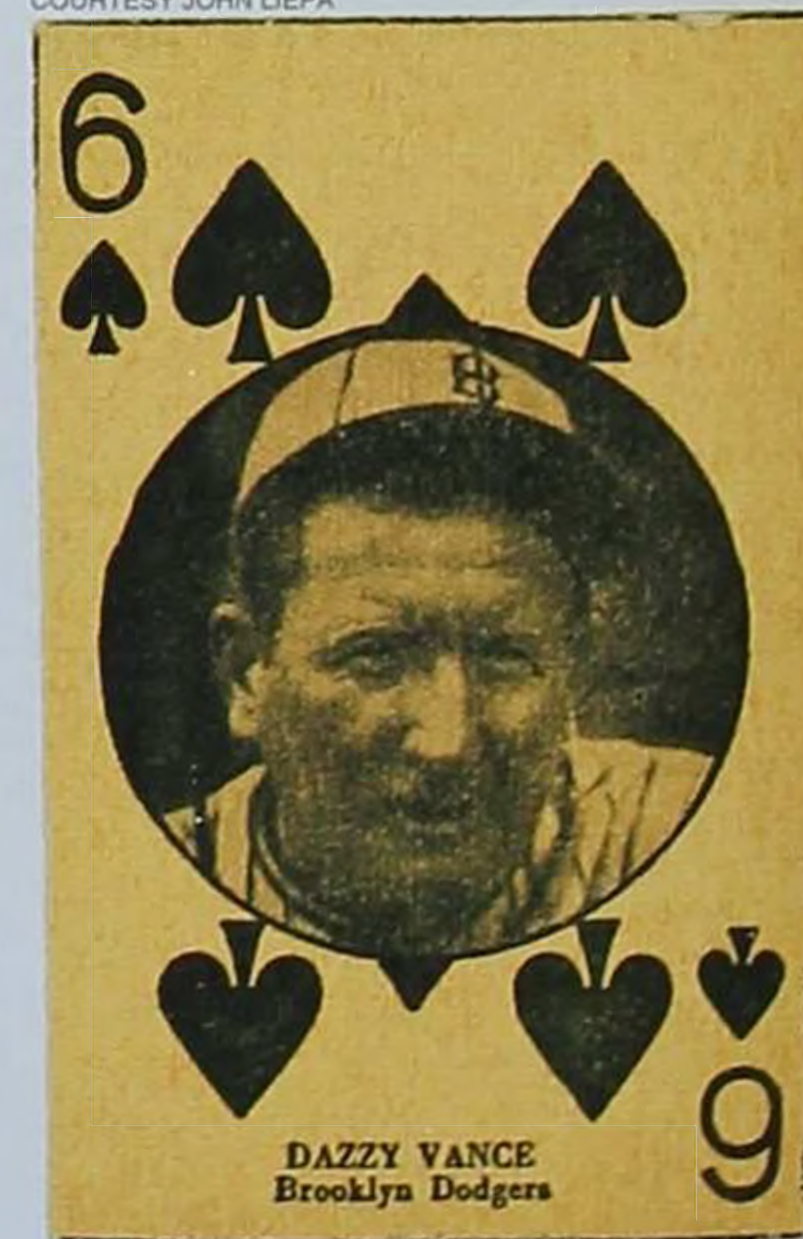
COURTESY JOHN LIEPA



**Bob "Rapid Robert" Feller:** b. 11-3-1918, Van Meter. Right-handed pitcher for Cleveland Indians, 1936-1956. Missed 1942-1944 seasons due to military service in World War II. Won 266 games. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, 1962. (Portrayed on 1952 Cleveland Indians card series by Num Num snack foods.)

**Clarence "Dazzy" Vance:** b. 3-4-1891, Orient; d. 2-16-1961, Homosassa Springs, Florida. Right-handed pitcher. Pittsburgh Pirates, 1915-1918. Sold to New York Yankees and played briefly, 1918. Brooklyn Dodgers, 1922-1933. Traded to St. Louis Cardinals. Began 1934 with Cincinnati, returned to Cardinals and briefly appeared for victorious "Gas House Gang" in 1934 World Series against Detroit. Brooklyn Dodgers, 1935. 197-140 record in 16-year career. Elected to Baseball Hall of Fame, 1955. (Portrayed on 1922 strip card. W560)

COURTESY JOHN LIEPA





.....  
*A passion for the game . . .*

## Warming up Feller

"HERE, DON, WARM THE KID UP," and with these words Bill Feller threw me a first baseman's mitt. I blinked my eyes as I caught the glove and automatically put it on. This was the Fourth of July in 1935. I was the County Agent at Adel, Iowa, and I was in general charge of the annual Farm Bureau picnic in the Adel City Park. We had many events scheduled for the day's entertainment, and there were committees and committee chairmen for each activity, and my main job was to circulate around the park and see that everything was going off according to schedule. We expected from 5,000 to 8,000 people, according to the weather, and this being a beautiful clear July day, the park was crowded. Earlier in the day, there had been races for the young people, a skillet throwing contest for women, and various other races and softball games. There was a speech by an important politician scheduled for late afternoon, but now at the noon hour we were getting ready for a big ball game.

During the early part of the century, semi-pro baseball had been very popular in the area, and many of the smaller towns had fielded semi-pro teams which played mostly on Sunday afternoons and holidays. Some softball was being played under the lights, but baseball at this time was a daytime activity, and the Fourth of July celebrations always featured baseball games.

Clem Luellen, from Minburn, was in charge of the baseball this year, and we had dreamed up a game that we knew would interest many people. Bobby Feller, from Van Meter, had been an outstanding high school pitcher,

and for several years had been quite a star on a semi-pro team sponsored by his father. At this time, he was 18 years old and had just graduated from high school. Several pro scouts were after him, and later on that summer he was signed by the St. Louis Browns and actually pitched a couple of games. His father's team, with Bobby pitching, was to face a pick-up team featuring Jim Grant . . . who had been a major league pitcher for several years, and was now being very successful in semi-pro ball throughout central Iowa. Most of the players on this team were older and were very familiar to Dallas County baseball fans. I had just wandered over to the baseball diamond to see if the baseball game was going to start on schedule when Bill Feller [threw] me the glove. I knew Bill very well because he was the County Chairman for our wheat committee in Dallas County, and in that capacity, he had spent quite a lot of time in our office. I had seen Bobby play several times, and like everyone who had seen him, was sure he was going places. I had seen him play in a junior American Legion game where Nile Kinnick was catching, and I think that every batter he faced either struck out or walked. He threw hard in those days but tended to be a little wild, and no one who faced him ever stood very close to the plate.

"The catcher was delayed," Bill told me, "and why don't you just warm the kid up til he gets here. It should only be a few minutes."

"I guess I can handle that, Bill, if it won't be too long. Can't you get me a catcher's mitt?"

"The catcher has our only mitt with him. That first base mitt should

do until he gets here." In the meantime, Bobby had put on his spikes, found a ball, and motioned me over alongside of the ball field. I don't remember that he said anything to me. He just started throwing. The first ball that he threw was harder than any ball I had ever caught, and each pitch was a little harder. I am sure that my eyes popped out. I was afraid to catch the ball and afraid not to. If it had ever hit me in a vulnerable spot, I am sure that it would have killed me. I started catching it in the pocket, but after I had caught about three balls, my hand hurt so that I could hardly stand it. My hand then became numb and that helped. I finally tried to catch the ball without ever letting it get into the pocket. Some first basemen were very good at that. Bill, the kid's father, was watching and grinning from ear to ear. I have an idea, and I had it then, that he had taken quite a lot of the same kind of punishment I was taking. After about ten minutes the catcher drove up, and I immediately relinquished my glove.

I can't remember who won the ball game, but I think that it was Bobby's team. None of those older players stood very close to the plate either, for Bobby was wild. In the first major league games he pitched he struck the batters out in record numbers, but he tended to walk quite a few. He became probably the greatest pitcher of all time. ♦

—Excerpt from "Donald and Marian,"  
by Don Fish (1994),  
State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City Library).



# Not Yet Ready for the Big Leagues

## The Keokuk Westerns, Iowa's First Professional Baseball Team

by John Liepa

Seventeen small boys flattened their noses against the glass door of a Main street establishment yesterday, perused one of the big posters announcing the forthcoming games, and discussed base ball excitedly."

The editor of the *Keokuk Daily Gate City* probably delighted in describing this scene in April 1875. Baseball had a new momentum in town, and the excitement was shared by adults as well as seventeen small boys.

Baseball had long been a staple in the river town, but the game had remained amateur, and Keokuk didn't play in any of the so-called state championships. As late as 1867, the newspaper acknowledged that a recent game "could not be called a 'match game' by any means. Both Clubs are quite young, the members thereof do not make any pretensions to be fully 'posted' in the various rules, regulations, &c. of the game, and the play of yesterday was intended, more than anything else, to awaken a more lively interest in what has become a National game."

By 1872, interest had grown, such that the amateur Keokuk Westerns incorporated and competed for the state championship. In 1874 the Westerns defeated the St. Louis Empires (Missouri's champions) and the Staten Island Base Ball Club, the best amateur club in the East (some thought the best in the nation). The same year they took on the New York Mutuals and the Chicago White Stockings. Although the Keokuk Westerns lost, they had dramatically improved their level of play, with a record of 23 wins and 9 losses. As the 1875 season approached, they set their sights on becoming the top team in the country. The Westerns applied to join the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, which many historians claim was in fact a major league. The bid was accepted.

The Keokuk team's arc from amateur to professional status followed the changes in American baseball. In the mind of the gentleman player, accepting money sullied the sport and would lead to greed and gambling. Other baseballists, however, had envisioned baseball as a business—with salaried players, keen competition, loyal fans, and lucrative profits.

The move toward professionalization began in two steps. In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stocking were formed as the first professional team. In March 1871, ten of the more powerful U.S. clubs met in Brooklyn and formed the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP). In the following years, charges surfaced about player control of the NAPBBP, contract breaking, failure to meet engagements, pool gambling, and even players betting on themselves to make money on the side. Although this soured amateurs even more, formation of the NAPBBP signaled that power was now in the hands of the professionals. A short-lived amateur league lasted only a few years.

In Keokuk, according to baseball historian Ralph Christian, two members of the Westerns' board of directors probably had the most expertise in deciding management issues. Both were from prominent families: John N. Irwin, a bank official; and C. L. Williams, in the businesses of coal and grain elevators. The other two directors were William Trimble, who managed a saloon and other interests; and Robert McGuire, perhaps an employee of Trimble or Williams. The articles of incorporation limited the team's debt load to \$1,000. "To fund the team until the season opened in May and to make needed improvements to Perry Park, management canvassed the city [and raised] 'quite a liberal sum . . . to keep the Westerns running,'" Christian writes.

Keokuk's bold efforts to field a professional team, according to Christian, make sense within "the context of 19th-century boosterism and regional rivalries that accompanied the rapid and seemingly boundless national growth of that era. Keokuk for a time epitomized this kind of boosterism." With growing political power, midwestern cities—even Keokuk—argued for relocating the nation's capital to their cities. "Thus, a baseball team competing at the highest professional level nationally could be utilized to boost Keokuk's chances if the capital were to be moved."

The Westerns' next challenge was the most formidable—recruiting professional players to the relatively small city of Keokuk. But by March 20, 1875, a very re-



spectable group of baseballists had assembled. Five from last year's team stayed on, and five new were hired (four of them had played in the NAPBBP). On March 20, the professional Keokuk Westerns met for the first time. Their outfits were white with blue stockings and trimmings, with the letter K on the chest and cuffs. Small, soft-crowned, brimmed hats topped the classy uniforms. As professionals bent on at least breaking even, they agreed to charge admission for the first time: 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for children.

In early April, the *Gate City* assessed the strength of the team. Pitcher Mike Golden "has already achieved a reputation for swiftness. During the Winter months he has been in constant practice, and has succeeded in changing his delivery from an underhanded throw to a regular pitch. He pitches much swifter and accurately than ever before." Catcher Bill Barnie "is quick and accurate, a sure thing on fouls, and a splendid second-base thrower." Jim Hallinan showed speed on the base paths and overall good fielding skills. He, Simmons, and Wally Goldsmith were powerful hitters. "The club practices regularly twice a day. . . . They are all in excellent trim, and expect to be able to give the Chicagos something to do in the game here May 3. The grounds have been enlarged and improved [and] a new amphitheatre built that will hold 1,000 people."

The team's potential also caught the eye of larger newspapers, and the *Gate City* eagerly reprinted their remarks. "The St. Louis Democrat says: . . . 'It may turn out that the Westerns do know more about the yarn and leather than a great many imagine.'" "Golden, the pitcher, is one of the swiftest in the country," the *Chicago Times* had commented, "and is said to be very hard to hit. The base ball excitement in St. Louis and Keokuk rivals that which Chicagoans experienced in 1870." The *New York Herald* had observed that the Westerns "are practicing incessantly, and . . . will doubtless surprise somebody before next October."

On May 2, 1875, the day before the first game, the *Gate City* was both anxious and excited: "The fact that the Keokuks have entered the professional arena, and that a large number of professional games will be played here during the season has awakened a widespread interest in the national game hereabouts, never before experienced. . . . The Keokuks and their capabilities have been discussed all over this country."

In its all-important role as local booster, the paper reminded readers that the team had done "more to advertise Keokuk abroad than any other institution in existence. They are a credit to our city, and we trust that our citizens will sustain them in their efforts . . . by turning out in large numbers whenever there is a game here."

Stormy weather delayed by one day the first professional game played in Iowa. The next day, May 4, was a huge disappointment for the 1,500 fans: the team was soundly defeated, 15-1, by the Chicago White Stockings. The *Gate City* looked back a few days to when "confidence was entertained that our boys would give the white hosed gentlemen a close game, if indeed they did not succeed in scooping them. After the first few innings, however, all hope of that was abandoned." Observers blamed "very loose fielding," Golden's "wild pitching," and an "erroneous decision" by the umpire. The catcher was blamed as well: "Barnie threw low to second base every time."

The next day "the Keokuks settled down to business and partially redeemed themselves," though they lost again to Chicago, 7-1. But the *Gate City* had more to worry about. "So far only about half of those who have witnessed the games have paid. Men and boys who would scorn to steal into a circus under the canvas, will sit on an adjacent fence and take in a ball game that other people pay their 25 or 50 cents to see. The fence surrounding the grounds can certainly be kept clear of intruders, and we presume that the owners of adjoining property would readily give authority to drive trespassers from their premises. With the aid of two or three good policemen, we think the gate receipts could be materially increased."

Although the Keokuks scored a victory against the St. Louis Red Stockings, the newspaper pointed out sharp differences: "Our boys are nearly all stalwart, muscular, and some of them rather fleshy, while the Reds are all small, and comparatively slender, and [appear to be] puny, half starved boys. . . . [But] they have been in training all Winter . . . developing their muscle. [Our team's] lofty stature and massive mold are not essential to success in the diamond field."

More losses followed. Commenting from upriver, the *Burlington Hawkeye* kindly reminded its readers that "Iowa ought to be proud of this club. It is the only one of professional standing in the State, and it has never received outside of the city of its birth, the encouragement and recognition its merits have deserved. . . . Let the people of Iowa who are pious and athletic, pray that our Keokuk boys may come back from their [road] trip covered with glory a foot thick."

An ominous pattern was developing: a few good innings at the start, followed by erratic pitching, fielding errors, and finally, blaming the umpires for bad calls. The losses were piling up. "The telegraph brings the announcement of another defeat," the *Gate City* sighed.



"We have been waiting very patiently for the Keokuks to find a nine that they can beat. The indications are now that we will have to keep on waiting until the Washingtons or some little club like that comes along." After yet another loss, the headline said it all: "The Same Old Story." The team "either lacks nerve, or confidence, or discipline, or all three." Patience was wearing thin with the home crowd and the editor, and excuses were no longer enough. "Boys, for Heaven's sake come home and practice awhile."

Less than one month into their season, the Keokuks had a dismal record of 1-10 against professional teams, and 2-1 against amateur teams. Juvenile clubs in Keokuk were considering challenging them. Troubled fans looked ahead to the three home games on June 10, 11, and 12 against the best professional team—the Boston Red Stockings, with a record of 23-0, and its superior pitcher A. G. Spalding. Iowa-born Calvin McVey was also on the Boston team and had established himself as a premier player.

Keokuk club officials informed their fans that the team was being reorganized for the first game with Boston. But despite heavy promotion and team restructuring, the results were the same, a Boston victory, 6-4. The *Gate City* made the best of it. "Everybody was induced to believe that the red legs would be able to make as many runs as they wanted to, and that the Keokuks would be kept so busy chasing leather that they wouldn't have time to do anything else. But that's where they made a mistake. The Bostons themselves were doubtless surprised to find in the Westerns such formidable antagonists. For some reason the attendance was not as large as anticipated. Not over one thousand persons were present, but they were fairly alive with enthusiasm. . . . After the first inning, the game was an exciting one throughout, every inch of the ground being hotly contested."

The close game had surprised Keokuk. The bigger surprise was that Boston decided not to play a second or third game and left the next morning. The Keokuk Westerns filed a formal protest to Red Stockings manager Harry Wright over the "act of bad faith to us, and on account of the disappointment it will be to parties

desiring to witness the game. . . . We will claim a forfeiture of the game."

Boston "evidently got weak in the knees and there is every reason to believe that they entertained a fear of being defeated here as well as in Chicago," the *Gate City* chortled. "The Keokuks went to the grounds yesterday afternoon, placed themselves in position, chose an umpire, and went through the formal proceedings of claiming the game. It was given to them by a score of 9-0, and will go upon the record of their credit." The Red Stockings had a different story; they left early because

of poor gate receipts and their need to rest up before playing Chicago.

On June 17, after another loss, the *Gate City* announced glumly that the directors had disbanded the Keokuk Westerns, principally because a "professional baseball club cannot be sustained here. The population isn't sufficient to furnish the audiences necessary to induce professional nines to come here and play the full series of games. The two last clubs [that played here] undoubtedly lost money. . . . The Keokuks have had a protracted run of hard luck,

and the interest in the game hereabouts has in consequence decreased instead of increasing. The boys accept the situation gracefully and are fully satisfied the managers have done the best that they or anyone else could have done. A number of them have already secured positions in some of the best professional clubs in the country, which demonstrates, the fact that the nine embraced some first-class material."

The directors elaborated: "The club was formed in good faith, the men were hired in good faith, and the Directors acted in good faith to the end—and right here is the time to settle the rumor now afloat, that the club is badly in debt. It does not owe a dollar that it has not the money to pay. Every player received his pay in full up to date, and some were overdrawn, and every debt owed by the club will be paid in full. Its outstanding liabilities [are] now less than one hundred and fifty dollars, and the money is on hand to meet these. We disbanded because the people of Keokuk generally failed to support us. We do not blame them, however, for this. If they did not choose to go to the games, that

KEOKUK GATE CITY, JUNE 8, 1875

**BOSTONS**  
VERSUS  
**KEOKUKS**  
AT  
**PERRY PARK,**  
**KEOKUK,**  
**THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, JUNE**  
**10TH AND 11TH.**



was their undoubted right. We attempted to give them honest and pure amusement during the summer. . . . The gate receipts were so small that the eastern clubs refused to come here for fear of loss. As we could get nobody to play, we quit—'stepped down and out,' and stayed not upon the order.

"As to the playing of the nine, we have this to say: That though beaten, we have played the best average game of any club in the country, except the Bostons. To prove this, we simply point to the official figures of the scores. We had one or two weak places, but we didn't have money enough to strengthen them. . . . Finally, we wish to thank the friends who have aided us, and to say to our unkind critics that if they knew a little more about the matter, they would talk a great deal less."

**I**t had all come to an abrupt and surprising end (though low attendance and dismal gate receipts ended many a U.S. team). But despite talent that was less than overwhelming, the Westerns were a scrappy group. Of their 12 losses, 6 were by two runs or less, including a 10-inning 7–6 setback at Chicago and a rain-shortened 1–0 defeat by the Mutuals. Their pitching and defense were not bad at all: the Westerns allowed only an average of 6.8 runs per game, just slightly above the league average of 6.3. The primary reason for the Westerns' sorry 1–12 mark was poor batting. The team batting average was a sickly .167. Only three of the starting players batted over .200. Nevertheless, as Iowa's first professional team, the Keokuk Westerns had introduced the state to a new level of baseball.

Although their short-lived but historic adventure was over, America's favorite pastime continued to thrive in the river town. Within days of the team's demise, the *Gate City* reported: "Our merchants and business men indulged in another match game of base ball at Perry Park yesterday afternoon. They were organized into nines called the Sardines and Lobsters. . . . The Sardines were victorious by a score of 32 to 28." ❖

*Author John Liepa is currently the chair of the Board of Trustees of the State Historical Society of Iowa.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The major sources for this article were Iowa town newspapers, 1850–1870. John Zeller's years of poring over 19th-century newspapers saved the author hundreds of hours of research; Merle Davis of Iowa City also researched baseball in many newspapers. For more on Keokuk, see Ralph J. Christian, "High Expectations, Small Market, Regionalism, and a Short-lived Season: The National Association's Keokuk Westerns of 1875," unpublished manuscript, 1996. Mary Bennett, SHSI Special Collections Coordinator in Iowa City, provided a wonderful array of early baseball images to help tell the story of Iowa baseball. The author's wife, Dianne, and son Torey provided assistance, encouragement, and support in ways too numerous to mention.

## *A passion for the game . . .*

### **The Waterloo Mullens and the White Sox**

**HIS FIRST LOVE WAS BASEBALL.** [Oscar Mullen] managed semi-pro teams during the depression and in the 30's started to work for the White Sox farm team in Waterloo. He was the groundskeeper and had the reputation for excellence in laying out pitchers' mounds. He retired from his job with the White Sox when he was 70 years old, but continued to throw out the first ball each spring until his death. The *Waterloo Daily Courier* never missed taking his picture on this occasion, showing Oscar with his feet propped on the railing, smoking a cigar. . . .

[For Oscar and his wife, Margaret,] their lives centered around baseball. Margaret was an avid fan, never missed a game and befriended all young players who joined the White Sox farm team in Waterloo. She took them in and gave them free board and room until they got their first paychecks. She followed them like a mother as they made their way up the ladder into big league baseball. They were close friends of the White Sox owners, the Comiskeyes of Chicago, and entertained them when they visited Waterloo. When preparing their home for sale after their deaths, stacks of scored baseball charts were found neatly organized on a closet shelf. Margaret could give statistics on every White Sox player who went through their system for 40 years. At Christmas time in 1953 [their daughter] Lois treated her father and mother to six weeks in Florida so they could attend spring training camps for the big league teams. Oscar and Margaret met old friends, reveling in six weeks of baseball in sunny Florida. The trip provided them with conversation for years.

During the depression Oscar managed a semi-pro team in the northeast Iowa area. They played on Sunday afternoons and the gate receipts just managed to feed the players after the game. If the money didn't go around Oscar always picked up the tab. ❖

—Excerpted from Peg Mullen,  
"Six Generations in Black Hawk County, 1852–1996,"  
State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City Special Collections)

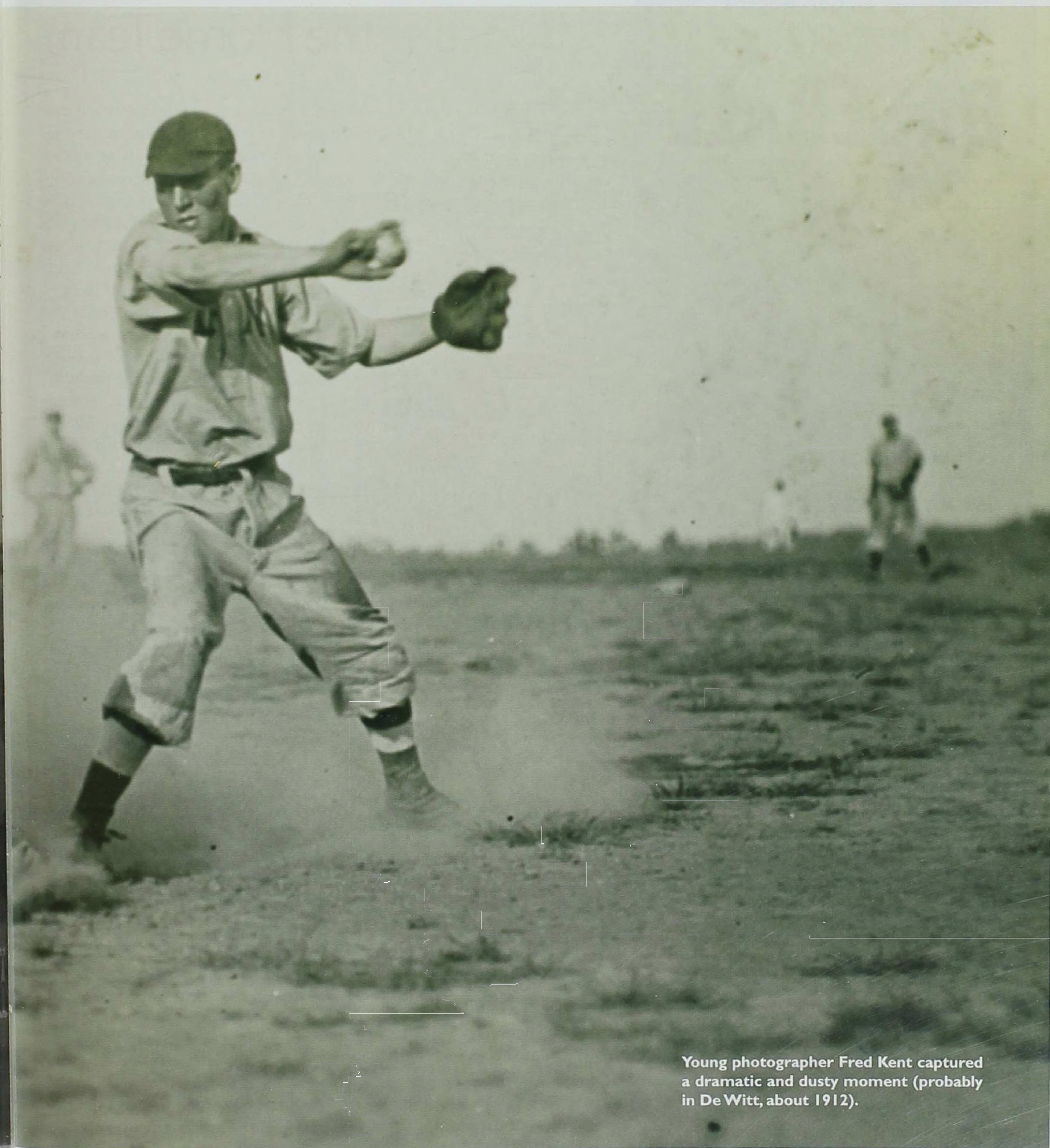


*A passion for the game . . .*



SHSI (IOWA CITY): KENT COLLECTION





Young photographer Fred Kent captured a dramatic and dusty moment (probably in De Witt, about 1912).



*A passion for the game . . .*



Young photographer Fred Kent captured a dramatic and dusty moment (probably in De Witt, about 1912).

SHS (IOWA CITY) KENT COLLECTION





HAVE YOU BEEN TO A BALL GAME LATELY?

## Cedar Rapids RED RAIDERS

# BASEBALL

HOME AND AWAY SCHEDULE -- MIDWEST LEAGUE 1963

## RED RAIDERS AT HOME - 63 GAMES

April 28, 29	Decatur
May 2, 3	Quincy
May 4, 5	Clinton
May 10, 11	Fox Cities
May 12, 13	Quad Cities
May 19, 20	Dubuque
May 21, 22, 23	Burlington
May 26, 27	Waterloo
May 31, June 1, 2	Wisconsin Rapids
June 9, 10	Decatur
June 13, 14, 15	Quincy
June 16, 17	Clinton
June 24, 25	Fox Cities
June 26, 27	Quad Cities
July 4, 5	Dubuque
July 6, 7	Burlington
July 10, 11, 12	Waterloo
July 15, 16	Wisconsin Rapids
July 21, 22, 23	Decatur
July 27, 28	Quincy
July 29, 30, 31	Clinton
Aug. 5, 6, 7	Fox Cities
Aug. 8, 9, 10	Quad Cities
Aug. 16, 17, 18	Dubuque
Aug. 19, 20	Burlington
Aug. 24, 25	Waterloo
Aug. 28, 29	Wisconsin Rapids

## RED RAIDERS ON ROAD - 63 GAMES

April 30, May 1	Quad Cities
May 6, 7	Clinton
May 8, 9	Burlington
May 14, 15	Dubuque
May 16, 17, 18	Quincy
May 24, 25	Decatur
May 28, 29, 30	Waterloo
June 3, 4, 5	Fox Cities
June 6, 7	Quad Cities
June 11, 12	Clinton
June 18, 19	Burlington
June 21, 22	Dubuque
June 28, 29	Quincy
July 2, 3	Decatur
July 8, 9	Waterloo
July 13, 14	Fox Cities
July 17, 18	Quad Cities
July 19, 20	Dubuque
July 24, 25	Burlington
Aug. 1, 2	Clinton
Aug. 3, 4	Decatur
Aug. 11, 12	Quincy
Aug. 14, 15	Fox Cities
Aug. 21, 22	Quad Cities
Aug. 26, 27	Dubuque
Aug. 30, 31	Waterloo
Sept. 1, 2	Wisconsin Rapids

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## Boosting the Home Team

Fans are what it's all about. Building a loyal fan base and maintaining high attendance at games are vital to the success of a community baseball team. Many of these efforts are manifest in baseball promotional material and programs. Looked at through the eyes of historians, these items reveal the

approaches used to appeal to various audiences. Consider these three.

*Top:* A 1963 Cedar Rapids Raiders poster asks, "Have you been to a ball game lately?" and touts the sport as "good family recreation." *Middle:* A 1948 program for the Des Moines Cubs plays on the popularity of local celebrities and cutting-edge automobiles. The cover reminds fans that a popular KRNT radio announcer will broadcast the games play-by-play. The station also donated a streamlined Tucker automobile, to be won by the favorite Cub player, as determined by fans' votes. (The innovative Tucker automobile company was short-lived. Only a few dozens cars were manufactured in 1948.) *Below:* The powerful design of this 1950 program for the Des Moines Bruins echoes the dynamics and excitement of America's favorite pastime.

Baseball clubs also depend on local volunteers to sell tickets and concessions and clean up the grounds, and on local merchants to buy ads in the programs, provide

uniforms, and offer special deals for players and fans.

The benefits of a team to a community were spelled out in a 1966 Cedar Rapids Cardinals program: "No other activity in Cedar Rapids receives the attention or carries the name of our city to the rest of the country as does baseball. Fifteen years ago there were 220 towns and cities with organized baseball below AA level [and] last year this number had shrunk to 60 and among these cities we finished 10th in total attendance and 8th in average size crowd." What this meant to Cedar Rapids was some 100 workers employed at the ball park, a financial boost to local businesses, and a "clean, wholesome place for people to go on a summer evening with the entire family." In essence: "To millions of people all over the country it means that Cedar Rapids must be a great place to live." ❖

—by Ginalie Swaim





On a February day in 1955, Roy Dillworth, groundskeeper and handyman at Pioneer Memorial Stadium in Des Moines, gets an early start on the baseball season. The commitment of staff and volunteers has long helped local teams flourish.



# Bud Fowler

## The First African American Professional Baseball Player and the 1885 Keokuks

*by Ralph J. Christian*

**B**ud Fowler made U.S. sports history as the first African American to play professional baseball. An early chapter of that history took place in Iowa. Born John W. Jackson to itinerant hop-pickers on March 16, 1858, in Fort Plain, New York, he grew up, appropriately enough, in Cooperstown—later the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. In Cooperstown he learned the trade of barbering from his father and apparently picked up the basics of baseball.

By 1878 he had dropped the surname "Jackson" in favor of "Fowler," and he soon gained the nickname of "Bud," according to biographer L. Robert Davids, because of "his inclination to call most others by that name." The first mention of him as a player appears to be when he pitched in April 1878 for a team in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Then on April 24, he attracted national attention when he pitched for the Lynn Live Oaks in a 2-1 victory in an exhibition game with the Boston Nationals, defeating 40-game winner Tommy Bond. Despite this achievement, Fowler appeared in only three more games for the Live Oaks before finishing the season with Worcester. For the next four seasons, Fowler played intermittently for teams in New England and Canada, largely supporting himself as a barber. While race may have been a factor in Fowler's numerous moves and often limited play, financial instability was the primary culprit forcing many leagues and teams to disband well before their seasons were completed.

Baseball as it was known in this era differed in many respects from the game we know today. Most communities had multiple teams, and it is often bewildering to sort them out in terms of what exactly constituted "amateur," "semi-pro," and "professional" and even the teams' continuity, because team and league names changed constantly. Initially, the terms "major" and "minor" league had little meaning because of the wide-open competition among teams.

In the immediate post-Civil-War period, all the

teams were supposedly amateur since no one was officially being paid to play. By the early 1870s, some teams moved into the semi-pro category by obtaining paying jobs for the best players. But given the disdain much of the public seemed to have for professional sports, this fact tended to be either denied or covered up.

This furtive type of semi-pro ball emerged in eastern Iowa in the early 1870s, in cities like Keokuk, Dubuque, Davenport, and Iowa City, but only slowly gained acceptance in the central and western portions of the state. Keokuk and Dubuque, in 1875 and 1879 respectively, were the first in the state to field teams whose players received salaries to play and were truly professional. Because of insufficient capital, inexperienced management, and lack of fan support, neither Keokuk nor Dubuque were able to complete full seasons.

Despite these failures and struggles in fielding professional teams, and occasional controversy about how semi-pro players were remunerated, baseball remained wildly popular with the masses. In addition to town teams that competed against themselves and teams from nearby communities, there were teams for virtually every age and occupational group. A very popular method of raising funds for local charities were games pitting doctors against lawyers, fat men versus lean men, merchants opposing wholesalers, and so on.

**F**acing discrimination because of his race, Bud Fowler by 1883 had abandoned the East for the Midwest, where he hoped to find greater opportunity to pursue his baseball career. That year he played for a team in Niles, Ohio (a fact not mentioned in other sources), and apparently performed rather well, largely as a pitcher and catcher. In 1884 in Stillwater, Minnesota, he played as an outfielder, pitcher, second baseman, and catcher; posted a respectable batting average of .320; and had a won-lost record of 7-8 as a pitcher.



Nevertheless, the Stillwaters were not very successful, either on the field or financially at the gate. The team disbanded, and Fowler returned to barbering.

According to baseball historian Bob Tholkes, Johnny Peters, the Stillwater manager and a former infielder with the Chicago White Stockings, "eventually helped" Fowler "catch on with the Keokuk team of the Western League for 1885."

By the time Fowler had been signed, Keokuk had been without professional baseball for ten years, and its citizenry had had to content themselves with the semi-pro and amateur varieties. Although the city's movers and shakers had abandoned their pipe dream of becoming the nation's capital, many of them believed that a professional team would be an ideal vehicle to promote their city and its resources. The men who had been on the 1875 team were long gone from the city, and management found themselves faced with the task of putting together a team from scratch.

The decision to hire Fowler was made by R. W. "Nick" Curtis, a well-to-do Keokuk businessman and the driving force behind local efforts to field a professional team for 1885. According to an account published in the *Keokuk Gate City and Constitution* over 60 years later, Curtis signed Fowler "on a sight unseen basis. Supposing him to be a white man, Curtis went to the depot to meet his train and was astonished when greeted by the Negro. He refused to let racial prejudice interfere, however" and let Fowler remain on the team.

While this story has a great deal of appeal due to Nick Curtis's apparent willingness to confront racial discrimination and treat Fowler fairly, it does not entirely ring true. Given Curtis's knowledge of baseball, his contacts with baseball people in other parts of the country, and the publicity generated by Fowler during his tenure with the Stillwaters, it is highly unlikely he would have been unaware of Fowler's race. In fact, Curtis may have hired Fowler, at least in part, as a drawing card for Keokuk's African American population. Curtis needed 800 fans per game for the Keokuk team to break even; Keokuk's black population was 11 percent, relatively large for a town that size.

The exact date of Fowler's arrival in Keokuk is unknown. He was not counted in the 1885 state census, taken during the first week in January, but newspaper accounts indicate that he had arrived and settled down well before the end of the month. In the past, Fowler's pattern when moving to a community was to support himself by barbering until the baseball season began, but there is no evidence that Fowler ever followed this trade in Keokuk. Instead, he capitalized on his athletic ability by engaging in a series of walking matches with

other individuals, either on foot or on conveyances like bicycles or roller skates.

In early February, Keokuk's *Gate City* reported that "J. W. Fowler, the colored baseball player is training on the upper floor of the colored skating rink for the walking match. . . . He is making from fifteen to twenty miles a day." He and Tom Walls of Ottumwa had "arranged a 50 mile walking match for \$50 a side and the championship of Iowa." Apparently, Fowler defeated Walls and won the title, because the *Gate City* soon told its readers about another "exciting race at the rink to-night. J. W. Fowler, the champion pedestrian, will make 3 miles go-as-you-please while Geo. Lowry makes 5 miles on a bicycle. Admission 15 cts."

The paper later reported, "The race lasted sixteen minutes and Fowler won. Lowry made four and a half miles. There was a good crowd present and applause was frequent." Whether or not this competition made Fowler the first two-sport African American professional athlete may be open to debate, but the rigid training regimen kept him in peak physical condition and gave him a competitive edge. The manner and fashion in which these matches were promoted also helped Fowler develop his nascent talents and flair for showmanship, which would serve him well in the years ahead.

While the "champion pedestrian" waited for the 1885 baseball season to begin, Nick Curtis struggled to get Keokuk admitted to a league. Early in 1885 much local discussion ensued about a Mississippi Valley League that would comprise 11 river towns from St. Louis to Dubuque. Only Keokuk applauded the idea. In early March, however, Curtis's hopes for a team of professionals were revived by the development of a reorganized Western League. The new Keokuk Base Ball Association filed articles of incorporation, with capital stock of \$3,000 and authorization to increase capitalization up to \$50,000.

Not surprisingly, Nick Curtis was elected club president. He traveled to St. Louis to meet with the Western League schedule committee. He discovered, however, that the committee was reluctant to allow Keokuk the sixth and final slot. The other teams—Toledo, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Cleveland—had far larger populations, ranging from 75,000 to 225,000. The committee feared that Keokuk with its population of 11,000 could not generate enough gate revenue to cover the expenses of visiting teams. According to the *St. Louis Republican*, Curtis "was ready to deposit \$5,000 in bank, as security for a faithful performance of their part of the schedule and regulations," but the commit-



tee "declined the offer, and with it the application, and instead accepted the application of Omaha." As consolation, the league made Keokuk an "alliance" team, protected by the national agreement, and agreed to have Western League teams play 30 games against Curtis's team in Keokuk's home park.

Meanwhile, Fowler and his teammates prepared for the home opener against the Kansas City entry in the Western League, set for April 8 at Sportsman's Park. The Keokuks wore uniforms of gold shirts, blue trousers, red and blue stockings, and red, white, and blue caps. Unseasonably cold weather held attendance down to 600, and the team suffered a 4-2 defeat.

In a rematch, Fowler played well in the field but the Keokuks dropped the contest, 3-2, in large part due to a questionable decision by the umpire. The team's misery increased on April 16 when they played Milwaukee's Western League entry on a rain-soaked field. Fowler was moved up to the lead-off spot, which he would occupy for the remainder of the season. A cloudburst ended the game after the eighth inning. Keokuk lost, 9-5.

At this juncture, Fowler and his teammates went on their first road trip, traveling to Hannibal, Missouri, accompanied, in the words of the *Gate City* editor, by their "Mascotte . . . a little darkey dubbed 'Snowball.'" On April 26, the Keokuks won their first game of the season, 10-9. Fowler had a good day, collecting three hits in four trips to the plate, and fielding second base flawlessly. A Hannibal reporter found it "a peculiarity of the game" that the Keokuks had "a German on first base, a negro on second, and an Irishman on third," even though by the 1880s, German and Irish immigrants had enthusiastically embraced the sport.

Back in Keokuk, cold weather kept attendance down to a meager 150 fans as the team suffered a 10-4 drubbing at the hands of Indianapolis. The next day, with the wind "blowing a perfect gale," the teams met again. In Fowler's six-inning stint as pitcher, he gave up no runs and surrendered only one hit in what is believed to be his only appearance as a pitcher for the Keokuks.

A few days after his sparkling pitching, and as the team prepared for another road trip, Fowler became involved in a money dispute with the team's management. The *Gate City* disclosed that "Fowler would not go to Springfield without money that he claims it is due, and the ball men to contrary. He was bounced from the nine." Very likely, Fowler, like the other players on the team, had not been paid or paid only in part. The team's

financial position had been precarious from the beginning, and the inclement weather and sparse crowds at the ball park would have added to cash-flow problems. Apparently, a settlement was reached; within three days "Fowler had relented and is playing ball again." In Illinois, Fowler and the Keokuks rolled off three decisive victories over Springfield, Jacksonville, and Bloomington, and returned home for a three-game sweep of the Chicago Blues, probably the top amateur club in the Midwest.

Curtis was still bedeviled by unsteady income. Part of the problem was state and local strictures prohibiting baseball and certain other activities on Sundays. For Curtis and other baseball managers, the Sunday prohibition meant one less day of gate receipts—significant gate receipts. Sunday was the one day of the week generally available to the public for leisure activities—especially to the working classes. Since the Keokuks could not play at their local diamond on Sundays, Curtis and his partners built a second ball park at High Banks, on the Illinois side of the Mississippi. The *Gate City* reported "that the ball players were engaged yesterday in shovelling out the diamond of the new ball field and didn't relish the work." The next day, a Sunday, a small steamer ferried fans across the Mississippi. At the new Crystal Glen ball park the Keokuk team defeated the St. Louis Pinafores, 12-0, in front of a crowd of 600.

Only a week later, word reached Keokuk that its team had officially been admitted to the Western League, replacing Omaha, which had just withdrawn due to financial difficulties. On June 6, the Keokuks won their first official Western League game, defeating Milwaukee, 10-9, before a crowd of 800 at Sportsman's Park. In the second game Fowler played errorless ball and banged out one hit in four tries. But their 13-game winning streak ended in their third game with Milwaukee, followed by three more losses and a forfeit when Keokuk left the field in protest over an umpire's call.

By this time, Fowler, both on and off the field, was the most popular player on the Keokuk team. The *Gate City* described him as "a good ball player, a hard worker, a genius on the ball field, intelligent, gentlemanly in his conduct and deserving of the good opinion entertained for him by base ball admirers here." He was also making great strides in developing the persona and people skills that would lead Sol White in his *History of Colored Base Ball* (1907) to describe him as the "celebrated promoter of colored ball clubs, and the sage of base ball." Fowler was learning how to keep his name in the newspapers and before the public. "Fowler can spin more baseball reminiscences than any of them," the *Gate City* remarked. In discussing player contracts under the na-





NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY, COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.

The Keokuk baseball club in 1885 with Bud Fowler (center of back row). Locally he was called "a genius on the ball field."

tional agreement, Fowler joked that "when a ball player signs a league contract they can do anything with him under its provisions but hang him." Fowler was referring to the reserve clause in player contracts that bound players to a team for their entire professional career until they were traded to another team or released. This provision gave teams greater control over players and salaries because the players' services were in effect owned by the team that had signed, purchased, or traded for them.

Fowler garnered national attention as well. According to the *St. Louis Republican*, "Experts who have seen Fowler, the colored second baseman of Keokuk, play ball say that he is a wonder in all departments of play." The national publication *Sporting Life* heaped tremendous praise on Fowler, declaring him "one of the best general players in the country, and if he had a white face would be playing with the best of them."

Unfortunately, the Western League was floundering. The Toledo, Indianapolis, and Cleveland clubs disbanded and Kansas City dropped out, mostly because of money problems, leaving only Milwaukee and Keokuk.

The Keokuks soldiered on, playing amateur teams from Iowa and surrounding states. Then on the evening of July 7, Nick Curtis and his directors voted to disband the team. It had become "impossible to arrange games

to be played upon the home grounds with clubs of sufficient ability to make it interesting for audiences," the *Gate City* reported soberly. Disbanding now meant that players might find engagements for the rest of the season." The paper summed it up: "This city is not large enough to support professional base ball playing."

For a brief period, it seemed likely that Fowler and several teammates would remain in Keokuk for the rest of the season and play for one of the local semi-professional teams, the Carson and Rands or the Gate Citys. *Sporting Life* reported that Fowler was "willing to manage and play with the Orion (Colored) Club of Philadelphia, but as yet is undecided what to do."

The *Gate City* had the final story on June 22: Fowler had "secured a good engagement at Pueblo, Col. and left for that city last night." He was "the last of the Keokuks" to leave town.

**F**owler finished out the season in Pueblo. The next year, 1886, he played for Topeka in a new Western League, helping lead that team to the pennant while batting .309 and leading the league in triples. He moved up to Binghamton, New York, in the International League, where he hit .350 in 34 games and played second base. But he was released when his team-



mates refused to take the field with him. Simmering racial tensions, both internal and external, were probably exacerbated by opposition from fans and other teams.

Denied his deserved opportunity to compete at the major league level, as were so many of the African Americans with whom he had competed, Fowler played sporadically over the next eight years. Playing with at least ten predominantly white teams in organized baseball, he lived a rather nomadic existence as the color line became more tightly drawn and African Americans were excluded from organized baseball by so-called gentleman's agreements. In total, according to James A. Riley, Fowler played a record-setting ten seasons in organized baseball, "a record until broken by Jackie Robinson in his last season with the Brooklyn Dodgers."

In the fall of 1894 Fowler organized the Page Fence Giants, serving as its playing manager in 1895, and in 1898 he played for the Cuban Giants. As his playing skills faded, he organized and managed several barnstorming clubs, including the Smoky City Giants in 1901, the All-American Black Tourists in 1903, and the Kansas City Stars in 1904.

Fowler's health failed in 1909, and he died of pernicious anemia a few days shy of his 55th birthday on February 26, 1913, in Frankfort, New York. His grave was unmarked for 74 years, until the Society for Ameri-

can Baseball Research placed a memorial stone on the site in 1987 to commemorate his achievements as professional baseball's first African American player. Six short but significant months of his long career took place in Keokuk, Iowa. ♦

*Ralph J. Christian is the historian for the State Historical Society's Historic Preservation section. He spends much of his free time researching Iowa's rich baseball history. Currently, his research is focused on the Black Sox Scandal, particularly the gamblers who attempted to fix the 1919 World Series, a number of whom had Des Moines and Iowa connections. This article developed from a longer paper presented at the Society for American Baseball Research Negro League Annual Convention at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in August 1998.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Keokuk newspapers of the period were a major source for this article. Additional sources on Keokuk include the Bickel Scrapbooks (originals at Keokuk Public Library, microfilm copies at State Historical Society of Iowa [Iowa City and Des Moines]); the 1885 Iowa Manuscript Census for Keokuk; and "Baseball Activity in Keokuk," manuscript, no author or date (Keokuk Public Library). Secondary sources include L. Robert Davids, "John 'Bud' Fowler," *Nineteenth Century Stars* (Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1989); James A. Riley, "John W. (Bud) Fowler," *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994); Bob Tholkes, "Bud Fowler: Black Pioneer and the 1884 Stillwaters," *The Baseball Research Journal*, no. 15 (1986); Sol White, *History of Colored Base Ball With Other Documents On The Early Black Game, 1886-1936*, comp. by Jerry Malloy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); and *Sporting Life*, July 22, 1885, quoted in Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, reprint edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984).

The longer, annotated manuscript from which this article developed is held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files.

## African Americans in Iowa Baseball

BASEBALL for African Americans in Iowa flourished from the late 19th century until integration in 1947, despite a ban of African Americans from organized baseball, which included major and minor leagues. Many black players left the racial prejudices of larger cities to play in the Midwest, where total segregation did not exist in many of Iowa's small towns and medium-sized cities. In 1898 the Des Moines Capitals became one of the first black teams to form in Iowa, followed by the Des Moines Giants and the Ottumwa Browns. High schools, private companies, and even a Marshalltown police department all had integrated teams during the segregation era. Several community-based black teams with exceptional performance records included the Algona Brownies (considered one of the best midwestern teams), Buxton Wonders, Cedar Rapids Colored Giants, and Des Moines All Nations. According to sports

historian Dave McMahon, other African American teams that rose and fell as interest and money dictated were the Des Moines Brownies, Gould's Invincibles, Enterprise Brownies, and Scott's Little Giants.

The Cedar Rapids Colored Giants traveled nearly every year in the 1920s and 1930s to play Iowa's small-town teams. Former teammates recount a 1933 game in Worthington when car trouble stranded several teammates. The local Worthington team lent players to the Giants, and thus an integrated team took the field in Worthington for the first time.

McMahon states, "Some of the best black baseball and softball players who ever played competed in Iowa." Davenport's Gene Baker was the first African American born in Iowa to make it to major league baseball, playing first on a Chicago Cubs farm team in Des Moines, then with the Chicago Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates, 1953-1961. He was also one of the

first black managers for a major league farm team.

Outstanding pitcher and native son Bob Feller was part of one of the most riveting stories of African Americans in Iowa baseball in his relationship with Negro League player Satchel Paige. Their 1946 barnstorming tour in a World War II surplus twin Tiger aircraft brought more than 400,000 fans to 32 games in 26 nights. McMahon notes that Feller's "reputation has suffered due to a few unfortunate remarks he made about [African American player] Jackie Robinson" soon after Robinson broke the color ban. But regarding Feller and Paige's 1946 barnstorming tour, "nothing demonstrated the absurdity of banning African-Americans from baseball more than these games."

—Excerpted from Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kernek, "Survey of Buildings, Sites, Structures, Objects, and Districts Related to the Development of Team Sports in Iowa, 1850-1960."



.....  
*A passion for the game . . .*

## Hocksy and Hoop

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, and sport was what there was in life, the Lions were among the state's best softball teams. Formally, they were the Prairie City Lions Club, named after their sponsor, in the way that other teams were known as Al's D-X of Reasoner, Pella Chevrolet, or the Sully Merchants. But we abbreviated the names, because Lions, alone, sounded authentically zoological, like the Baltimore Orioles or the Detroit Tigers.

Few of the Lions wore their complete uniforms, preferring tight white T-shirts with their blue-trimmed baseball pants. All, except the pitcher, were local men who'd played baseball and softball together for years and reacted unanimously in a game. The pitcher, Elmer Hocksbergen, worked in Newton and lived near one of the many surrounding hamlets that trees and the world have grown around. He was capable of wizardry with a softball, sending it with extraordinary speed into the catcher's glove and coating it with a spin as it left his hand that made it drop at home plate. He suffered a genius' mercurial temper, however, and a corresponding wildness, and if he fell to one of his moods, a thick brooding hung over the bench like a blanket, and the game was finished. But when he touched the core of his gift, something transcendent took place, evident from the first inning, and through the crowd the words were passed: "Hocksy's on."

So my passions were rarely wasted on the Lions. They won seriously, and often, and sometimes melodramatically with scripted victories. But I was from the beginning loyal to Harold Timmons. For several years, I played catch every summer with our neighbors' visiting grandson. We gave each other high fly balls, making the most prosaic catches appear miraculous. Back and forth, all day long; volleying heroics. We were Lions, and he usually chose to be the first baseman or the center fielder, while I invariably was Harold Timmons.

Timmons is a small man, was bald even then. Before each game, he packed his cheek with Red Man chewing tobacco. Everyone called him Hoop and still does. There is no anecdote that left him his nickname. He was a high school student, stacking shelves and carrying groceries at DeWit's store, and Don DeWit one day, from nowhere, called him Hoop'ndasher. He didn't resist it, heard it contracted over time, and there is no more story than that.

I'm not sure why, in our games, I always pretended to be Hoop Timmons. Perhaps I sensed his kindness. Although he always hit well, and fielded flawlessly, there were more apparent idols. Hocksbergen, the pitcher; Lowell McFadden, the tall, thin center fielder, who covered ground with smooth, deerlike strides; John Shuey, the first baseman, who did everything well and with the quick,

mincing steps of a speeded-up movie. Timmons, on the other hand, performed with an economy of movement that became a kind of flamboyance if you watched for it. I have a dear picture of him rounding second base toward a triple, his legs chopping the earth and his arms uniquely stiff at his sides, only his hands flapping loosely behind him, paddling the air. ❖

—Excerpted from Douglas Bauer,  
Prairie City, Iowa: Three Seasons at Home  
(Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979).



COURTESY RALPH J. CHRISTIAN



Taking the team picture has been a tradition since baseball began. Above: A Des Moines team of newsboys (1915 or earlier). Below: Mid-20th-century photographs of Little Leaguers from Brooklyn, Iowa; and an Albia-Hiteman team.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



# Kids Rule the Diamond

by Ginalie Swaim

Some got to wear snazzy uniforms, others wore T-shirts with a sponsor's logo. Some brought their own gloves, others borrowed them. Some played on diamonds manicured by the parks department, others scratched out baselines on a vacant lot. Regardless of these differences, when kids strode onto the ballfield, they owned the game. Many Iowans still hold the memories—good or bad—of fielding the ball, missing a pitch, or rounding the bases.

"Before and after school, and at noon, work-up was the game," Don Fish of Fort Dodge wrote in his family memoir. "There was room for two diamonds on the school grounds, and while the diamond on the northeast side was the favored one, quite often there would be two games going at once. Sometimes a few girls played on the little diamond, but baseball at our school was entirely a boys' game. In fifth and sixth grade we had teams that either played each other or occasionally played other schools. One year we had an unusually good team, or so we thought, and we arranged a game with Willowbank School out on the north side. We played the game at Willowbank, and we got beat; we not only got beat, but we were sure that the umpiring was what caused us to get beat. The umpire was a Willowbank boy, and it was more difficult for our pitcher to throw strikes than it was for the Willowbank pitcher, and the winning run was walked in. . . . The game almost ended in a fight [and] we vented our anger by marching home in a group, chanting, 'Willowbank cheaters! Willowbank cheaters!' We had protest marches, even in those days.

"Sometimes we had regular baseballs, but often the covers came off, and when it could no longer be sewn back on, we wrapped it tightly in black tape. I had a small catcher's glove and was usually the catcher, but I did not have a mask, and I occasionally came up with a black eye or bruised nose. My nose is still a little crooked." ❖

Opposite: It's March 1956, winter coats are off, and the batter is up. Two Chariton pupils are ready for action.

SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



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# Sports Sites: The Old Ball Park

HISTORIC PRESERVATION focuses on far more than old houses, as demonstrated in a recent massive survey of buildings, sites, structures, objects, and districts related to the development of team sports in Iowa, 1850–1960. In consultation with Iowa's State Historic Preservation Office, in the State Historical Society of Iowa, the survey was completed in 2003 by Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kernek of Tallgrass Historians L.C.

Watch for more historic sports sites from across the state, featured in upcoming issues of this magazine. We launch the series with baseball.



The Pisgah Baseball Field appears to have been built in the late 1930s or early 1940s. It is one of the better-preserved western Iowa amateur ball parks and retains a strong sense of time and place. The successful small-town baseball program that used the field spawned major leaguer Loren Babe, who played here from 1938 to 1942. Another major league player, Bob Wiltse, also played here.

SHSI (DES MOINES), SHPO. PHOTO BY TALLGRASS HISTORIANS, L.C.



Carroll's Merchants Park was built in 1948/1949. The stadium is built of poured cement. The semi-professional Iowa State League played here. Carroll secured college players from across the nation to play; they were given local jobs and boarded in local homes. Two Carroll Merchants team members, Johnny Blanchard and Sammy Esposito, went on to major league careers. The park is now used for local and state high school competitions as well as for town and Little League play.





Davenport's Municipal Stadium (now John O'Donnell Stadium) is Iowa's oldest extant baseball stadium. Completed in 1931, "it is sited in a breathtaking location along the west bank of the Mississippi River," according to historian Ralph Christian (*right*). "Its red brick façade gives it a character often missing in minor league ball parks." Minor league teams in the Three-I League played in this park, and future Hall of Famer and U.S. senator Jim Bunning pitched here for the Davenport Tigers in 1951.

Although renovated in the 1980s, it still presents the look of a grand old baseball stadium and is now the home of the local Midwest League team, the Swing of the Quad Cities, named in honor of local native Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke and his contributions to American jazz.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)



# Wilkie

## *James Leslie Wilkinson and the Iowa Years*

by Ralph J. Christian

Few individuals contributed as much to the long-term and ongoing success of Negro League baseball as James Leslie Wilkinson—or “Wilkie,” as he came to be called by his players and close friends. The only white owner in the Negro National and American leagues, Wilkinson developed his Kansas City Monarchs into a perennial baseball powerhouse; helped revive Satchel Paige’s sagging pitching career; signed Jackie Robinson to his first professional baseball contract; and successfully pioneered night baseball five years in advance of the white major leagues. In her history of the Monarchs, Janet Bruce describes Wilkinson as a “shrewd businessman” and “hustling promoter,” who truly loved baseball. Wilkinson, Bruce notes, also “earned the esteem of his players by maintaining a first-class operation” and a “good reputation” in the African American community for “being diplomatic, unassuming, and easygoing.”

Few know, however, that the roots of Wilkinson’s baseball successes lay in Iowa, where he spent nearly 37 years before moving to Kansas City and establishing the Monarchs. Most published accounts of Wilkinson’s life pay little attention to his early years and contain major errors or omit significant details. He was not born in Perry, Iowa, in 1874, as many sources claim, but nearly 100 miles to the north, in 1878. An item in the local news column on the front page of the *Algona Republican* on May 15, 1878, reported: “Born.—on Tuesday, May 14th to Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Wilkinson of Algona, a son.”

Wilkinson’s father first came to Iowa in the late 1860s and clerked in a store in Perry for two years, before returning to Michigan to attend a Detroit business college. He taught school for several years and married Mertie Harper. In 1877 the couple moved to Algona, the county seat of Kossuth County, where J. J. taught school, sold insurance, and participated in local politics.



James Leslie Wilkinson in 1924. Although he is best known for his work with the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro League, his baseball career in Iowa lasted nearly four decades.

Relatively little information has come to light regarding the Wilkinsons’ oldest son, James, and his boyhood in Algona, where he undoubtedly learned the rudiments of baseball on local sandlots. By 1892, he and his family, which now included three siblings, had moved to Jefferson, Iowa; then to Omaha (where James became an accomplished pitcher and likely graduated from high school); and finally to Des Moines. There James worked for his father, who was a manager at Iowa National Life.

The young man also attended Highland Park Normal College and played on its baseball team. Primarily a pitcher, Wilkinson emerged as one of the premier hurlers of Des Moines and central Iowa. He also played professional and semi-pro baseball, using the pseudonym of “Joe Green” to protect his amateur status. During 1895, “Green” pitched for at least three local teams, in-



cluding the Turners, Cycling Club, and Clippers. He drew praise for his "splendid work in the box" when he gave up only five hits and struck out ten batters in pitching the Cycling Club to a 4-3 victory over Iowa Agricultural College in Ames. In the next few years he continued honing his pitching skill, exhibiting what might best be described as coolness under fire. As a pitcher on the Winterset Maroons he fanned as many as 15 men in a game and averaged better than nine strikeouts per game. While playing for Brooklyn, Iowa, he was said to throw "the ball to a queen's taste." In 1899 he pitched for the Des Moines Star Club, a venerable semi-pro outfit of mostly 18- to 21-year-olds and an incubator of professional baseball talent, established some ten years earlier by future Hall-of-Fame executive Ed Barrow. It is highly probable that Wilkinson worked at least part time hawking newspapers and magazines, given that the Star teams were predominantly composed of newsboys and carriers.

By 1900, the Des Moines city directory listed him as a "clerk" at Chase Brothers, a leading Des Moines grocery store. His hiring likely had more to do with his pitching skills on the outstanding semi-professional team the store sponsored than with his talents as a grocer. "The wonderful pitching of Wilkinson" became a constant refrain in the sports pages of the *Iowa State Register*. In early August, however, disaster struck. A broken wrist derailed whatever dreams he might have had of pitching professionally. It was clear that he would never be more than a third- or fourth-tier pitcher.

A partnership with his father in real estate and small-scale contracting provided James with a steady income; practice in organizational and promotional skills; and flexibility to pursue baseball. He played with various teams for a few years. In 1904 he joined a new semi-professional baseball team organized by Hopkins Brothers Sporting Goods. This proved to be the start of an association that would last a dozen seasons and make him a notable figure in baseball circles.

Hopkins Brothers was a traveling team that rarely played in Des Moines, where it was based. Most of its early games were in nearby towns or in those that could be reached by train and back on the same day. Many on the team, who had refused offers to play on minor league teams, held down jobs in Des Moines and couldn't travel long distances or be gone for stretches of time. The team usually played for a purse of \$50 to \$100, plus 60 percent of the gate receipts if they won, or 40 percent if they lost. A side bet between managers, with a collection taken up by the players, might range from \$25 to \$150.

Wilkinson, as shortstop, and his teammates got off

to a tremendous start, playing before large crowds and defeating college, amateur, semi-pro, and professional teams, at one point winning 17 of 18 games. But winning so many games made it harder to book new ones, as a headline in the sports section of the *Register and Leader* explained: "HARD TO GET GAMES. HOPKINS BROS. HAVE AMATEUR TEAMS FRIGHTENED BY THEIR PROWESS." Fans didn't want to watch games with predictable outcomes, and therefore gate receipts declined. The team was now "willing to play with any team in the state that is at all in their class" and took a two-week road trip into northwestern Iowa in search of competition. Given the length of this trip, it was highly likely that only those players with jobs at Hopkins Brothers were able to participate.

The team concluded its 1904 season with a doubleheader against the all-black Buxton Wonders (Buxton was a coal-mining community in southeastern Iowa, and a majority of its population was African American). Earlier, the Wonders had lost to Hopkins Brothers. This time the Wonders were augmented by what the *Register and Leader* described as "several Chicago colored artists who were connected with the [African American] Algona Brownies two years ago." Hopkins Brothers won the first game; the Wonders, the second. "The town turned out enmasse, fully 700, mostly colored, witnessing the two first class exhibitions of the national game."

Wilkinson was captain and manager in 1905. He played as well, though in the words of a candid *Register and Leader* sportswriter, he was "a good shortstop and plays with his head. He is unfortunate in not being able to hit." The team was now a charter member of the new Interurban League, along with teams in nearby communities. The league was the brainchild of H. H. Polk of the Interurban Railroad Company, and E. N. Hopkins and Earl Evans of Hopkins Sporting Goods. Polk's Interurban Company provided free transportation and uniforms (likely purchased from Hopkins Brothers), and teams could choose a guarantee of expenses or a 60-40 split of gate receipts. Competitive balance was the Interurban League's major problem. "The Hopkins team at the start is expected to have the best of it," admitted the *Register and Leader*, "but an effort will be made to keep the weak teams strengthened and keep up interest in the schedule until the season's end."

Wilkinson again planned a lengthy road trip in northern Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas, probably hedging his bets by taking only his very best players. By scheduling non-league matches, he was in effect forfeiting several games scheduled by the league and jeop-



ardizing its future. He proved himself prescient. By the end of June, the Interurban League had already disbanded.

In 1906, it seemed that Wilkinson found some real competition—the professional Iowa State League teams in Marshalltown, Oskaloosa, Boone, and Fort Dodge. Hopkins Brothers lost each game and even two of three games to Grinnell College, and limped home with a 2–13 record. Their apparent vulnerability now made it easier to book games, until the team rose from its slump and resumed their winning ways.

Wilkinson tried a new tack in 1907. He booked several games that coincided with fairs, carnivals, festivals, and reunions, events likely to attract larger crowds, bigger purses, and increased gate receipts. These contests usually involved a mix of town and semi-pro teams from Iowa and sometimes beyond. In Garner the Baseball Tournament and Street Carnival, which offered a \$750 purse, appears to have been typical of the new venues. Probably atypical was the person standing behind the catcher—“Miss Amanda Clement, the only lady profes-

sional baseball umpire in the world.”

Wilkinson continued this tack the next year. The season was one of the strongest; at one stretch the team won 31 of 33 games, often by large scores. Ironically, Wilkinson disbanded the team that September. Perhaps the team was too good for its own good.

Wilkinson now had in mind a traveling team that was more of a novelty: the Hopkins Brothers’ Champion Lady Baseball Club. In the parlance of the day, these kinds of clubs were called “Bloomer Girls” or “Bloomer” teams, though most usually had some males on their rosters. During the late 19th and early 20th century, several of these teams traveled the country, playing men’s ama-

teur and semi-professional clubs. Since 1902, the Boston Bloomer Girls, one of the most famous, had played in Des Moines and barnstormed across Iowa annually, proving so popular that other Bloomer teams toured the state as well. According to women’s baseball historian Debra A. Shattuck, “The Bloomer Girls teams relied on sideshow style appeal to draw fans and, not surprisingly, the bottom line was money.”

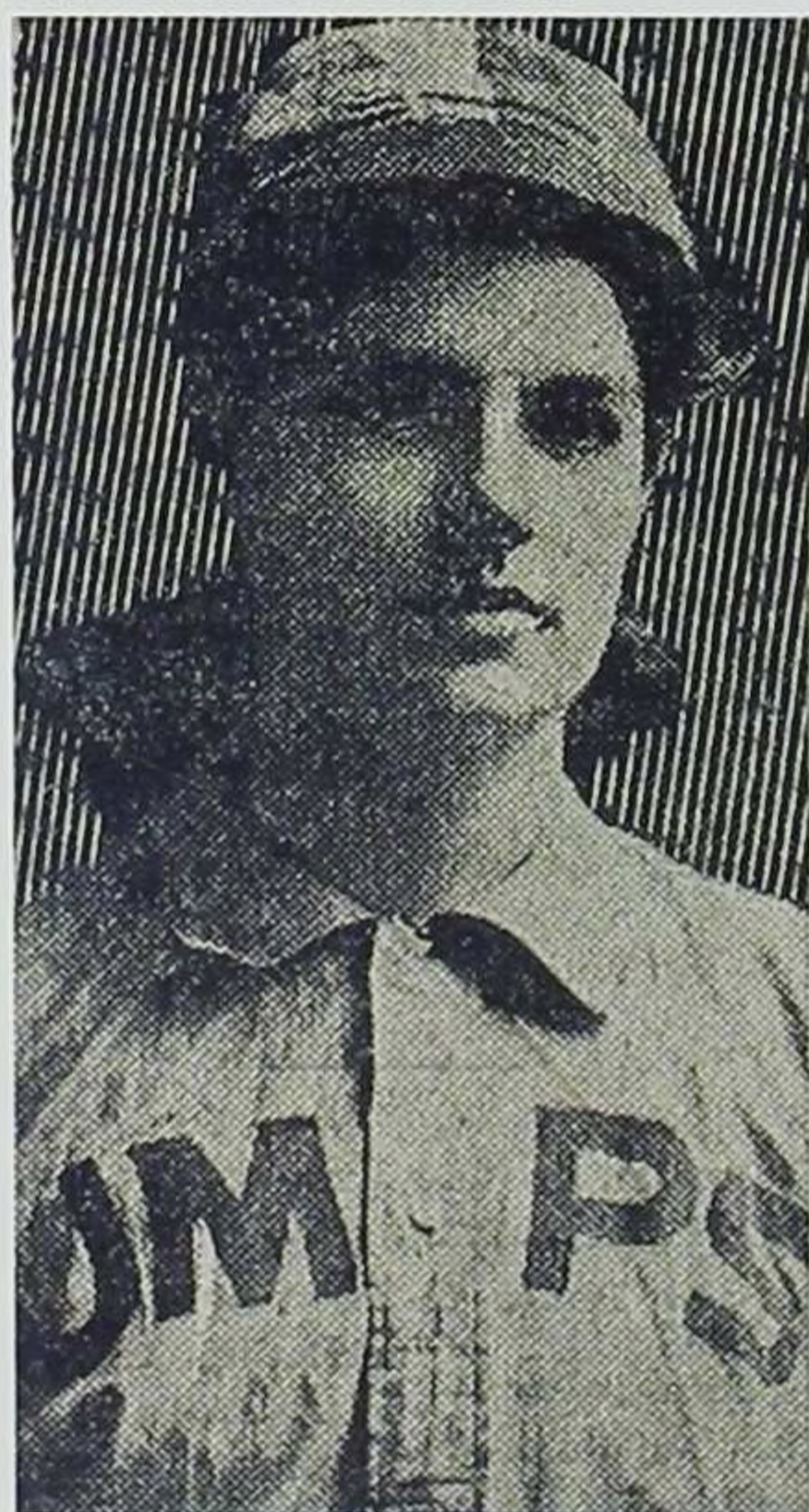
While Wilkinson certainly expected a profit from the gimmick, he also wanted a quality product. He left Des Moines in early spring 1909 to scout and sign strong players, and returned with Celia Brown for first base; May Fey for second; and outfielders Alice Burke, Edith Ryan, and Kittie Hisey. Of the five, Brown and Hisey, according to the *Register and Leader*, which ran their photographs on the sports page, “are considered the best.” The five were joined by a Miss Kroll, who was a pitcher, and superstar May Arbaugh, who played under the name of “Carrie Nation,” the ax-wielding prohibitionist. Arbaugh had been a star player for the Boston Bloomer Girls and was billed as “to women ball players what Honus Wagner is to the men,” thereby comparing her to the individual considered the best all-around major league player at that time. Wilkinson’s promotional materials emphasized that the women were “Girls Who Can Really Play the Great National Game,” and he promised “an aggregation of the World’s Greatest Lady athletes . . . making sensational catches and daring slides.”

The team roster also included Wilkinson, two male players from the previous year, and catcher Ben Reeves. An Iowa farm boy, Reeves was known locally as the “Rocky mountain wrestler . . . by virtue of a three months wrestling course of training with Dwyer of Denver,” according to the *Register and Leader*. Wilkinson made sure that as a “wrestling attraction,” Reeves was ready to take on all comers.

The Hopkins Brothers’ Champion Lady Baseball Club lost its first game, 6–3, to the SeEVERS team, one of the best men’s semi-professional teams in Iowa. But victories across the state soon followed, demonstrating to the *Register and Leader* that “baseball is a woman’s as well as a man’s game.” “The girls play a high class article of ball, fielding, hitting, throwing, and running the bases remarkably well.” Pitcher Kroll possessed “a line of slants and benders that would make the best of league twirlers set up and take notice.” The team’s “fine conduct on the field” made “a decided hit with the crowd.”

For their western barnstorming tour, Wilkinson leased a Pullman Palace Car. Painted a dark green and

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Amanda Clement first umpired at age 16; she was 19 at the Garner, Iowa, game. A 1906 news story said, “See her once, mask on, behind the catcher and hear her call the balls and strikes, and at once you reach the conclusion that a young woman of skill, judgment and determination is performing with marked ability.”



christened the *Marathon*, the car had six staterooms, a dining room, kitchen, and baggage room. On June 7, the *Marathon* headed west with the team and mascot Buster, a brown bulldog. Wilkinson took along what might best be described as a portable ball park. This consisted of a canvas fence, 14 feet high and 1,200 feet long, and a canopy-covered grandstand that could seat 2,000.

Undoubtedly, Wilkinson was making money. He dissolved the real estate partnership with his father, purchased a stylish residence in an upper middle-class Des Moines neighborhood, and reinvested substantial profits in the team and its operations. He hired Greek wrestler Gus Poppas to relieve catcher Ben Reeves, who had faced 300 opponents the previous summer. He added a "Miss Murphy" to the team. Most likely, this was 17-year-old Lizzie Murphy, in the third year of a career that would earn her the title of "Queen of Baseball, the best woman player in the country." A larger Pullman car now transported Wilkinson and his team.

He may have needed a larger car to carry a lighting system, which he had begun using for night games in 1910. That May, the *Register and Leader* had commented on a closely won game in Stratford, Iowa: "The night game was largely attended and approved. A very novel and interesting game." Later, the team played "in Chicago to 5,000 fans by daylight and a crowd of the same size at night." Although the reporters didn't elaborate on the lighting, Wilkinson most likely was experimenting with a system utilizing acetylene gas.

Three very successful seasons whetted Wilkinson's ambitions even more. Ever the shrewd businessman and skillful promoter, he now developed a new type of barnstorming team. During the early 20th century, in addition to Bloomer clubs, there were numerous teams made up entirely of a particular nationality or racial group—African Americans, Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese, or Hawaiians—that toured the country with considerable success. Wilkinson concluded that a team consisting of a mix of nationalities and racial groups, a team that also played exciting ball, would appeal to the public and prove profitable. Because no one else had fielded such a mixed team before, he could claim title to a unique, first-of-its-kind product, and promote it as such.

Over the next few years Wilkinson hired Native Americans, Japanese, Hawaiians, Canadians, Germans, Frenchmen, Cubans, Chinese, Filipinos, Jews, African Americans, and Americans. He named the team, appropriately, the All Nations.

The team's debut was on May 5, 1912, in Des

Moines. Before a thousand fans, the All Nations defeated the Moose Lodge team, 3–0, in seven innings. Although one sportswriter had assumed that the greatest attraction would be "Carrie Nation, probably the greatest woman ball player, who will be seen on first base" for the All Nations, the actual star was John Donaldson. "The lanky colored twirler of the All-Nation team," declared the *Des Moines Capital*, "was the sensation of the day in his way of pitching. He had a variety of curves that fairly dazzled the Moose team and but one man reached first." Wilkinson had lured Donaldson away from the Tennessee Rats, an African American barnstorming team, for whom "he is said to have struck out 21 men in a fourteen inning game last season and two days later to have struck out 24 men in a sixteen inning game."

The next day, the *Marathon* pulled out of Des Moines with Wilkinson, the team, the canvas fence, and the portable grandstand. Most likely, Wilkinson toured the Midwest, then the West to California and the Pacific Northwest before barnstorming back through the Dakotas and Minnesota into Iowa. In Fort Dodge the *Messenger* remarked how pitcher Donaldson had "puzzled [the team] with his steam and curves." Dodger outfielder Red Sanders said that this "negro has more 'stuff' than 'Rube' Marquard or other big leaguers."

Cuban Jose Mendez also pitched. Biographer James A. Riley calls Mendez "a smart pitcher who changed speeds" and had a "fastball, coupled with a sharp-breaking curve." In Cuba, Mendez had posted wins against future Hall of Famers Christy Mathewson and Eddie Plank. New York Giants manager John McGraw said that a major league club would likely pay \$30,000 for the rights to Mendez's contract if he were white. Other key players included Sam Crow, a Cherokee who played third base; Frank Blatiner, a Hawaiian second baseman; and Goro Mikami, an outstanding Japanese outfielder, who first played under the pseudonym of "Jap Mikado."

Although the All Nations trained in Des Moines in the spring of 1913, they received very little local press. They won 119 games, lost 17, and tied 2, but apparently played no games in Des Moines, the state of Iowa, or bordering states. That changed in 1914. A western tour preceded games in Iowa and surrounding states, and many coincided with local fairs and festivals. Very likely, it was during this period that Wilkinson entered into a partnership with J. E. Gaul, who infused capital into the operation and relieved Wilkinson of most of his duties as field manager. This in turn, gave Wilkinson more time to promote and publicize the team. Newspaper coverage increased dramatically, especially in the *Register and Leader*. He highlighted two new pitchers—



Jess "Cannonball" Jackson, an African American who had played in Buxton and in Mankato, Minnesota; and Joe Graves, an 18-year-old Chippewa pitcher who had trained with the Philadelphia Athletics and was farmed out to the All Nations by Connie Mack for more seasoning. Wilkinson sent colorful dispatches back to the newspaper: "Mendez, the Cuban, put the game on the ice in the fifth inning with a home run drive to center." Mikami's "one-handed catch in right field . . . saved the day." Donaldson, "the phenomenal southpaw, spread the whitewash . . . allowing but four hits and striking out eighteen." At one stretch he pitched 41 innings without giving up a run, and 81 innings with only two.

Spring training for the season had probably taken place on the Des Moines University athletic field, only a short distance north of the Wilkinson family's residences at 1338 and 1340 Clark Street, where the players probably boarded. But in 1915, although Wilkinson listed Des Moines as his residence and team headquarters, he conducted spring training elsewhere, probably in Kansas City, Missouri.

*Sporting Life* considered the All Nations "an outfit that baseball sharps claim is strong enough to give any major league club a nip-and-tuck battle." Nevertheless, they lost to the Chicago Union Giants, a leading African American team that had barnstormed across Iowa several summers. The loss was at the Sibley Carnival and Street Fair. The game attracted 3,000, but there were other attractions, too: bands, dancers, balloon ascensions, trained seals, and "educated" bears.

Shortly after the season ended, Wilkinson moved the entire All Nations operation and his family to Kansas City. According to historian Janet Bruce, Wilkinson moved because "with its meat-packing plants and good railroad connections," Kansas City "had both the black population and the access to other large cities that Des Moines lacked." While these aspects were certainly important, the fact of the matter is that Des Moines had become too small a stage for the baseball genius of 37-year-old James Leslie Wilkinson.

The All Nations flourished in Kansas City in 1916, but World War I disrupted the next season. Five of the 14 players received draft notices. Wilkinson disbanded the team in 1918. Although he briefly revived it in 1919, he soon turned his attention to an even greater venture, the Kansas City Monarchs and the Negro National League. As owner and manager of the Monarchs, he kept some of the best All Nations players, including Donaldson, Mendez, Bill Drake, and Frank Blattner.

Initially, Rube Foster, founder of the Negro National

League in 1920, opposed admitting the Monarchs as a charter member because Wilkinson was white. Foster eventually relented, and Wilkinson was even elected the Negro National League's secretary.

One factor that may have lessened Foster's opposition was that during the years with the All Nations, Wilkinson had held steadfast to what may have been an informal gentlemen's agreement to respect the territorial rights of Chicago's various African American teams, relinquishing central Iowa and other parts of the Midwest to those teams. Very likely, this is why the All Nations had played only four games in Des Moines, and why most of the Iowa games were in the less populous northern section of the state.

Beginning with the Monarchs, Wilkinson's star rose steadily in the world of baseball, a story familiar to most baseball enthusiasts. He died in 1964, ending almost seven decades in baseball—nearly four of them in Iowa. In February 2006 he was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame, a long overdue honor. ♦

*Ralph J. Christian is the historian for the State Historical Society's Historic Preservation section. In his free time he researches Iowa's baseball history. He and his wife live in a 122-year-old house in Des Moines's Oaklands Historic District and within walking distance of J. L. Wilkinson's former residence and the site of Western League Park, where the All Nations played their first game in 1912. This article developed from a longer paper presented in 2000 at the Society for American Baseball Research Negro League Annual Convention, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The sources used in the research for this article include county histories, federal and state censuses, city and business directories, and local newspapers of the towns where Wilkinson or his teams played. Secondary sources include Mark Alvarez et al., *Baseball for the Fun of It* (Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1997); Janet Bruce, *The Kansas City Monarchs: Champions of Black Baseball* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985); Ralph J. Christian, "Edward Grant Barrow: The Des Moines Years" (unpublished paper presented at the 1999 Society for American Baseball Research Annual Meeting, Phoenix, Arizona); Larry Lester, "Only the Stars Come Out at Night! J. L. Wilkinson & His Lighting Machine," and John B. Holway, "Bullet Joe and the Monarchs: Will Cooperstown Let Them In?" both in Lloyd Johnson et al., *Unions to Royals: The Story of Professional Baseball in Kansas City* (Kansas City: Society for American Baseball Research, 1996); "Lizzie Murphy" in "The Girls of Summer," [www.exploratorium.edu/baseball/murphy.html](http://www.exploratorium.edu/baseball/murphy.html); James A. Riley, "James L. Wilkinson," "Jose Mendez," and "All Nations" in *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994); David Pietrusza, "Night Baseball," [www.totalbaseball.com/history/event/business/nightball/night.html](http://www.totalbaseball.com/history/event/business/nightball/night.html); Debra A. Shattuck, "Women in Baseball," [www.totalbaseball.com/group/women/history-ds/women.html](http://www.totalbaseball.com/group/women/history-ds/women.html); and Maury White, "Mystery of 'Jap Mikado' is Solved: Japan's First Professional Player Started in Des Moines," *Des Moines Sunday Register*, January 8, 1995. The longer, annotated manuscript from which this article developed is held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files.





On a quiet day in McGregor, bordered by the Mississippi and sheltered by wooded bluffs, a few players claim the town diamond.

# Town Teams

In the late 19th and early 20th century, nearly every town in the state had, at one time or another, a town team or several town teams that played in loosely organized leagues. These leagues often included towns from the same county or geographic area. Town teams also competed against barnstorming, semi-professional, and professional teams.

Teams were formed by such entities as towns, parishes, busi-

nesses, fire companies, and groups such as the YMCA, American Legion, and Knights of Columbus.

In Council Bluffs in the late 19th century, the Union Pacific freight office fielded a team that played a similar railroad team from Omaha. In some Catholic communities, there were both public and parochial teams, such as in Shelby County in the 1930s. One such parochial league in the 1950s included Arcadia, Dedham,

Templeton, and two teams from Carroll.

Competition could be fierce. A 1920s broadside, for a picnic and homecoming for Hawkeye and northwest Fayette County, promoted the upcoming game between Hawkeye and Elgin: "Two Little Eight League leaders clawing each other for a big purse. A clean but red hot battle."

In the religious community of the Amanas, in eastern Iowa, base-





ALL THREE PHOTOS THIS PAGE: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



In a town with more than one team, each needed a group identity. "Fat Men's Clubs" were not unusual: Here, a Manchester team wears cone-shaped hats (1915); and Eldora players make a fashion statement, complete with a frontiersman on far right.





Above: Women with megaphones and stylish hats root at a baseball game during "Picnic Day" in Doon, 1909.

Right: A team from Avoca (1894-1895) strikes a defiant pose. Formal studio portraits of teams and individuals were common late in the century.

ball was formally forbidden as a frivolity; however, clandestine games were often played. In the 1920s, the Amana Athletic Association was formed with a team in each of the seven villages. Middle Amana native and major leaguer Bill Zuber started his baseball career with the Middle Amana team in the late 1920s. By 1932, when communal life ended in the Amanas, baseball had become an integral part of village life.

Some town teams also played softball, which became especially popular in the 1930s. Perceived as a gentler kind of game, it was also called "kitten ball." A 1920s broadside for a Farmers' Day celebration in Jesup noted that "Kitten Ball is getting to be one of the real games and there will be a game between the town team and a team from the country."

During World War II, the shortage of young men made it difficult to field minor league teams. In their absence, industrial leagues were formed in Waterloo

and Clinton (among other Iowa cities). To qualify, players had to be employed in a vital, war-related occupation in the various essential industries. These leagues were not without their problems. According to historian Michael Benson, "Managers battled to keep teams together as players changed work shifts frequently and couldn't always be there at game time. War factories worked in three eight-hour shifts, so it was hard to find nine guys who all got up at the same time."

In 1947, the Iowa Western Amateur League was created out of former town team leagues in western Iowa. Despite the recent trend of small towns losing population, the league is still active and towns continue to field competitive teams and refurbish their ball parks.

—Adapted and expanded from Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kerk, "Survey of Buildings, Sites, Structures, Objects, and Districts Related to the Development of Team Sports in Iowa, 1850-1960" (on file at the State Historical Society of Iowa, Historic Preservation section, Des Moines).

For more on town teams, turn the page.



SHSI (DES MOINES)

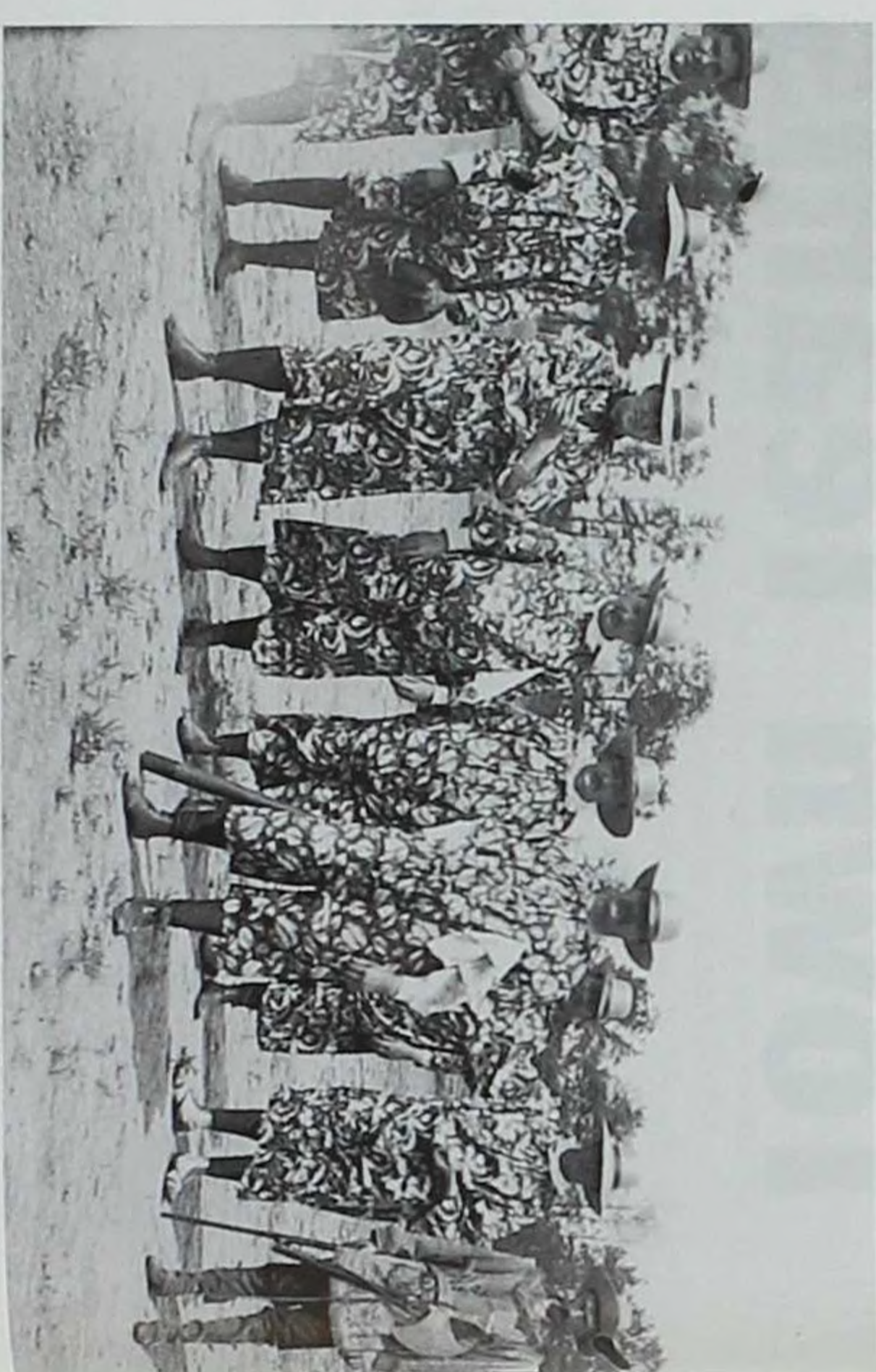




ALL THREE PHOTOS THIS PAGE: SHS (IOWA CITY)



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For more on town teams, turn the page.



SHS (DES MOINES)





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*Baseball \* Tournament*  
 — AT THE —  
*FAIR GROUNDS*

*Monday, August 17, at 2:00 p. m. Sharp,*  
*PARKER vs. DE WITT.*

*Admission, - - - 25c.*  
*AMPHITHEATRE FREE.*

Above: The sign on the pole and the uniforms with a capital D suggest that the Dickens Auto Company was the sponsor of this team (about 1927). It was not unusual for towns as small as Clay County's Dickens (under 300 in 1915) to field their own teams.

Left: An 1890 broadside promotes an upcoming tournament.

Below: Fans on the grassy periphery of the diamond watch a game in De Witt (about 1911). Note the cars and buggies in the background.





ALL IMAGES THIS PAGE, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

# BASE BALL!

The greatest game of the season will be played at  
**Corydon, Saturday, October 3.**  
 BETWEEN *1891*  
**HUMESTON AND ALLERTON.**

The latter club is to be strengthened by four players of the famous Shane Hill club.

## BATTERIES

**HUMESTON:**

ORLUP & EBEL.

**ALLERTON:**

WEBER, STULTS & SULLIVAN.

This is to be the greatest game of the season as both clubs will play for blood. No one should fail to see it. *John S. Entler* of Bonaparte, who is well known to the lovers of the game, will officiate as umpire which is a surety of a fair and quiet game.

**GAME CALLED AT 3 P. M.**

Admission 20c.

Ladies 10c.

ALLERTON NEWS JOB PRINT.

*Rain & no game.*



Above: Autos line the road at a game near Rose Hill (population 250), in the mid-1920s.

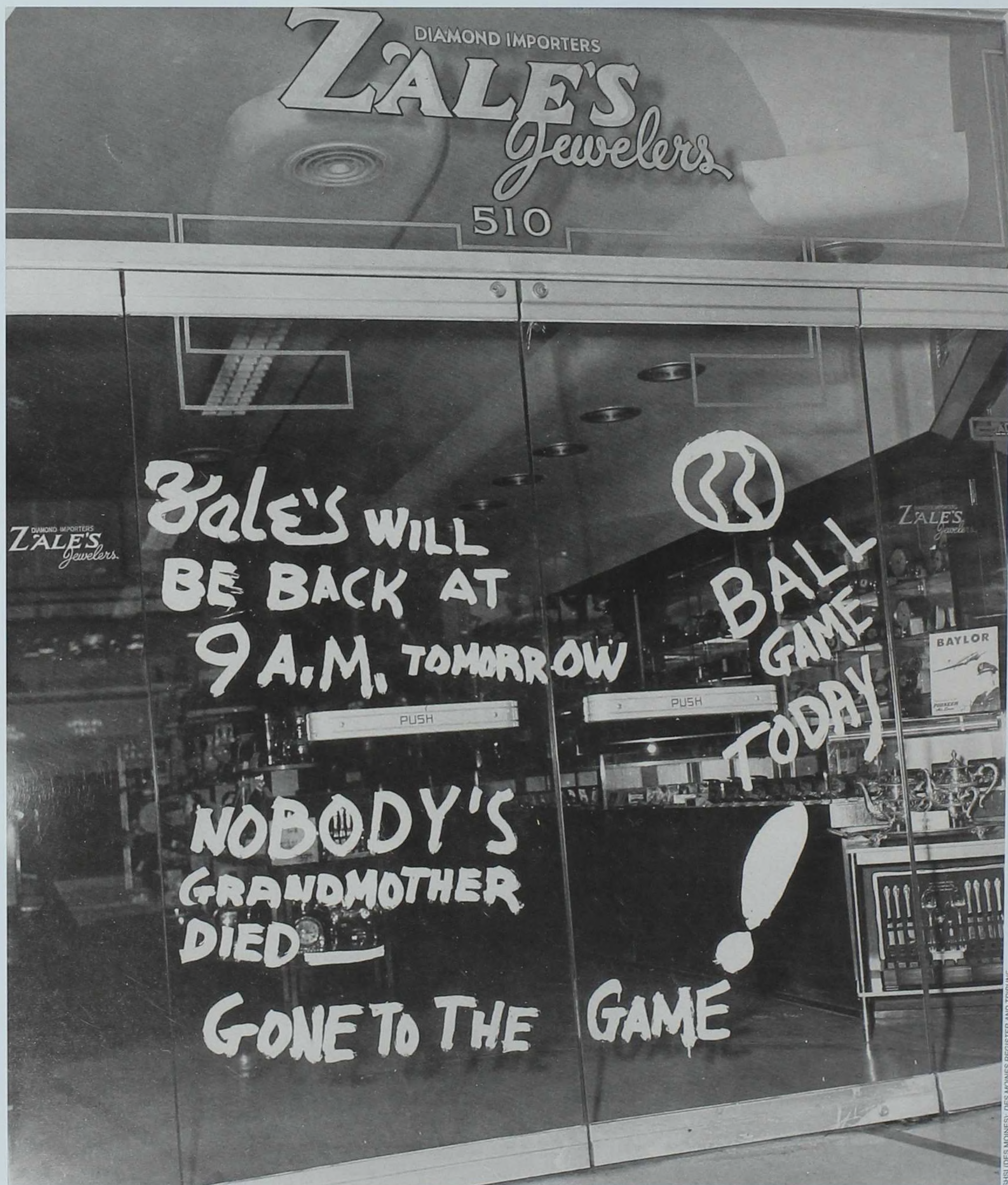
Left: Strengthened by the "famous Shane Hill club," the 1891 Humeston-Allerton game promised to be played "for blood." The orange broadside was pasted into a scrapbook compiled by John S. Entler, the umpire of many games in southeastern Iowa. Note that he added in pencil at the bottom: "Rain & no game." According to historian Ralph Christian, Shane Hill was largely a family team in Wayne County from the 1870s to 1896. In 1918, the team played "old timers" games to raise money for the war effort.

Below: Not every team wore classy uniforms, nor was every baseball diamond clearly defined.





*A passion for the game . . .*



Pleasure before business: Des Moines jeweler Selwyn Leeds locked up his store and took his 15 employees to the Bruins' opening game in April 1950. Who could blame him?



SHSI (IOWA CITY). COPY PHOTO BY CHARLES SCOTT.

**"MUGGSY" MCGRAW OF THE GIANTS IS A MOST AGGRESSIVE LEADER—ADVISES YOUNG FELLOWS**

**IN GRAYVANS.**  
Cigarettes which are quite  
poor on the path to baseball  
stadium.  
If youngsters paid less at-  
tention to newspaper print  
they could keep their batting  
eye longer.  
No man can play both base-  
ball and high talk. He's got  
to drop one or the other.  
The man who admitted  
his weakness and song were  
bad, and agreed to drop the  
song, built his optimism, but he  
busted the sucker's game.  
There's a man who's a hard-  
core. There the sucker is  
the public eye, but shortens its  
diamond career.  
They say the flycatchers have  
dimmed their eye. Ah, white's  
out, but they don't mean the  
white fly.

John A. McGraw, better known to baseball fans as "Doc" McGraw, is the "big" McGraw, leader of the New York Giants is one of the most astute baseball managers in the country. His fighting spirit is as strong as his back everywhere. McGraw has a fine sense of humor. He has three wives and three children. He says he will be in the National League next year and that his club will be strong contender for the championship.

McGraw is probably the best paid man in baseball, says Tim Wright, the New York Herald Tribune sports writer in an interview. Certainly he is one of the most brilliant leaders in the game. McGraw is a man of the future. He can be certain develop them in his career proves the contrary. All that he didn't win a pennant last year but the year previous for that.

McGraw is now in New York looking for a new team and to the bright light and to the most important men in the game.

As a side line, McGraw has a hill and palace, where he is to be found on the national game isn't being played. I dropped into the big place. He shaded drop-lights and green-covered tables in time to hear Jaws' voice in the, by this time, widely cited interview that he was strong the "cheer" player.

And John J. said more. He said he believed in getting an early start, only to separate the Dead wood as early as possible. But because (he said) that gets the jump over him.



JOHN J. MCGRAW, THE LITTLE GIANT.

# THE GIANTS IS A MOST RESSIVE LEADER—ADVISES YOUNG FELLOWS

onals Says Cigarette Stubs are Guide Posts on the  
vion—Tip Wright Gives His View of Manager

from several times out of many.  
to know where future Ladies,  
Gamblers and Cobles will do well to  
get inside their hat McGraw.

The Giants will report at Mar-  
tinez, says Tip Wright. "I be-  
lieve that getting away on the right  
side means much. The team road  
prosperity is what at fast speed and  
and the pace is better fitted to land  
first in November than the one  
all back is come from behind."

fact that the public wants a fast, hard  
fighting team was shown considerably  
by the attendance figures. We can  
draw very little on the road last sea-  
son."

"How do your records look at a dis-  
tance?" I remarked.

"Generally good, good—at  
a distance. Some retain their appear-  
ance, but the majority fall off. I think  
we have a lot of that boy."  
The trouble with the average am-

erican player and his club is that he  
gets discouraged by the time it is  
starting late in the season, when  
he hasn't a cent in his pocket to  
enter himself a future and set an  
example.

"This is a mistake. No man's job  
is safe as long as there isn't hope for  
him in October. The game, if you  
will is a continuous struggle to hold  
outs. The competitor who is good in  
April, and thinks his job is finished,  
may develop the touch in September.  
I don't mean the cock-eyed  
player, but I like the men who know  
confidence, feel the man who knows  
certainly, when success is ahead  
hands with him."

"The life of a major league is not  
the easiest way. It's hard, unprofit-  
able work. No player can make good so  
long he doesn't believe in the team,  
heart and soul. No man can play  
baseball and highballs. Here's got to  
keep up on the edge. Satisfaction  
doesn't come with success in the ma-  
jor league any more than it can in  
any other business."

"Some men are wonder why they  
lose the ball. There's generally a  
reason. Success makes some con-  
fident. They believe they can show  
themselves and be as good as error  
but they can't. The man who admit-  
ted loss, women and men were bad  
and offered to cut out the most likely  
an epidemic, but he honored a brother  
player. The minor are full of players  
who played the white dirt street in  
city company. When a certain thing  
didn't succeed, a player's victim,  
didn't mean the transcendence, but  
the ability."

To against cigarette smoking and  
drinking. Such are bound to ruin the  
best hitting eye in the game and  
seem on a ball. You'll find cigarette  
stubs are the guide posts in the  
path of baseball abilities.

"What advice do you give young  
men?" I asked.

"I tell them that if they hope to  
stick they must shake booze and  
cigarettes, pay no attention to prob-  
lems from the crowd or adversity  
(which is apt to cause a big head)  
road very little small trial and get it  
all when artificial hit is necessary  
watch the leader on the team,  
keep away from men and women. I  
want to lead them along the primitive  
lane; remember they are blind to play  
ball and had not to play ball. If they  
can go by with this and have national  
ability, they are better sure to reach  
their name in black face type in the  
retrograde calendar for some time."

"How about Pique Raymond?"

"Raymond is a great player, with an  
unfortunate weakness. He is a great  
player, but he is a great player. But I have  
faith in Raymond," the "Little Red"  
said. "He is a great player, but he is a  
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He is a great player,

Mr John S. Entler,  
Bonaparte, Iowa  
Friend John.

Has any one advised you that your  
are to umpire a game of ball here to-morrow  
between the Court House Rats and Counter-Jump-  
ers? If not let this be the notice and be sure  
to be on hand.

Very truly yours,

H B Seavey

# Riverside Park

4 BASE BALL BENEFIT 13

FACTORY vs BUSINESS MEN

LABOR DAY, 1911  
ADMISSION 25c.

Class 8

**An Unusual Letter**

James Fiedelman Sharp of Chicago was in a recent Bonaparte Club when there was a reading of a letter from a woman to her husband and him by express delivery. The letter was from Mrs. A. J. Touché to her son, who was in the army. The address on the letter was as follows:

Carry me straight to Iowa state in  
the name of the Lord, and tell him  
that I am not a sister and belong to  
John Seabury, his child with his  
own good hair.  
[The name of the woman and address  
in it is unremembered.]  
and hurry to his aid,  
[her name]  
the things without any unbecom-  
ing delay.

Get me back (quick) to the Texas 10.  
I need some to send here. [The  
woman's name is not known.]  
and, president I have to ever received.

## JAKIE'S MISTAKE

Ottumwa, Champions of Central Association

[illegible]

Every page in the John S. Entler baseball scrapbooks provides a slice of local and national baseball. The scrapbooks are archived in the Iowa City Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa. The 25 other Entler scrapbooks are about boxing, bicycling, and local events and people.

JOHN S. ENTLER MAY HAVE BEEN A STOVE AND tinware dealer by trade, but he was clearly a sports aficionado by passion. Entler, who lived in Bonaparte, umpired baseball games in southeastern Iowa with apparently a strong hand, according to an announcement of a 1903 game: "A good clean game is assured, as Boss Entler does not countenance rowdyism."

The massive collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa include 28 Entler scrapbooks, three of them about baseball. Reusing books as scrapbooks by pasting items

over the text and illustrations was a common practice. Entler reused two oversized trade catalogs from men's clothiers and a nonfiction book. He covered the pages with baseball clippings, scores, cartoons, advertisements, poems, broadsides, jokes, and postcards, national and local. One scrapbook includes items from the 1890s to 1909. The other begins with 1910 and ends with his penciled note on the bottom right corner of the back cover: "Finished this book Jan 17–1913. The day I was 61 years."

—*The Editor*



COURTESY RALPH J. CHRISTIAN



Fans in the Waterloo grand stand may have been focused on the game, but the individuals who created this hand-colored postcard were obviously focused on the fans. As this issue makes clear, it takes both—players and fans—to make a team a success.

STATE  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY *of*  
IOWA